The Latino/a Condition

A Critical Reader

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other savages had been imported from Africa, enslaved, and used to replace the American natives who died in such enormous numbers in the fields and mines of the Caribbean. But the end of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, after almost ten years of war, brought with it the need to integrate the rural Indians into the political economy of the nation. The task was given to one of Mexico's leading intellectuals, José Vasconcelos, who was appointed minister of education. With three words, he proclaimed the integration of the Indian into Mexican society at the most profound level: *la raza cosmica*.

To explain the notion of this cosmic race to people who could not read, Vasconcelos turned to Mexico's painters. He commissioned Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, among others, to paint murals depicting Mexican subjects, and he gave them complete artistic freedom, which they used to attack the government, the colonialists, the capitalists, and the Spanish conquerors. A new version of Mexican history appeared on the walls of public places. For the first time in four hundred years a large number of people began to see the conquest in a different light: Instead of the discovery of a dark, savage continent by intellectually, technologically, morally superior white men, the muralists portrayed the destruction of the glorious civilizations of the Americans by the brutal Spaniards.

After Vasconcelos and his muralists, the victory of the Indianists would seem to have been assured. But there were doubts, even in the mind of the minister of education himself. Vasconcelos wrote that the "blood and soul" of Mexico were Indian, but the language was Spanish. And even more pointedly, the civilization, he said, came from Spain.

NOTES

1. In 1990, Kirkpatrick Sale offered a fascinating revision of the European version of the history of the Americas in *The Conquest of Paradise*. His humanistic, thoughtful work contrasts sharply with a restatement of the old ethnocentric white European view published a year later by Mario Vargas Llosa. As the quincentennial celebration of the Voyage of Columbus drew closer, books, films, television programs and articles appeared in ever-increasing numbers. The Sale and Vargas Llosa books remained at the opposite poles of opinion.

Chance, Context, and Choice in the Social Construction of Race

Ian F. Haney López

The Mean Streets of Social Race

The literature of minority writers provides some of the most telling insights into, and some of the most confused explorations of, race in the United States. Piri Thomas's quest for identity, recorded in *Down These Mean Streets*,[1] fits squarely within this tradition of insight and confusion. Thomas describes his racial transformation, which is both willed and yet not willed, from a Puerto Rican into someone Black. Dissecting his harrowing experiences, piercing perceptions, and profound misapprehensions offers a way to disaggregate the daily technology of race. In the play of race, chance, context, and choice overlap and are inseverable. Nevertheless, I distinguish and explain these terms in order to explore the thesis that a race is best thought of as a group of people loosely bound together by historically contingent, socially significant elements of their morphology and/or ancestry.

Chance

The first terms of importance in the definition of race I advance are "morphology" and "ancestry." These fall within the province of chance, by which I mean coincidence, something not subject to human will or effort. Insofar as we have no control over what we look like or to whom we are born. Chance, because of the importance of morphology and ancestry, may seem to occupy almost the entire geography of race. Certainly for those who subscribe to notions of biological race, chance seems to account for almost everything: one is born some race and not another, fated to a particular racial identity, with no human intervention possible. For those who believe in biological race, race is destiny. However, recognizing the social construction of

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race reduces the province of chance. The role of chance in determining racial identity is significantly smaller than one might initially expect.

The random accidents of morphology and ancestry set the scene for Piri Thomas's racial odyssey. Seeking better prospects during the depression, Thomas's parents moved from Puerto Rico to Spanish Harlem, where Piri and his three siblings were born. Once in the United States, however, the family faced the peculiar American necessity of defining itself as White or Black. To be White would afford security and a promising future; to be Black would portend exclusion and unemployment. The Thomas family—hailing from Puerto Rico of mixed Indian, African, and European antecedents—considered themselves White and pursued the American dream, eventually moving out to the suburbs in search of higher salaries and better schools for the children. Yet in their bid for Whiteness, the family gambled and lost, because even while the three other children and Piri's mother were fair, Piri and his father were dark skinned. Babylon, Long Island, proved less forgiving of Piri's dark skin than Spanish Harlem did. In the new school, the pale children scoffed at Piri's claim to be Puerto Rican rather than Black, taunting Piri for "passing for Puerto Rican because he can't make it for white,"[2] and proclaiming, "[t]here's no difference . . . [h]e's still black."[3] Piri's morphology shattered not only the family's White dream, but eventually the family itself.

While the family insisted on their own Whiteness as the crucial charm to a fulfilling life in the United States, Thomas, coming of age amid the racial struggles of the 1950s and himself the victim of White violence, fought the moral hypocrisy he saw in their claim to Whiteness. Piri unyieldingly attacked the family's delusion, for example challenging with bitterness and frustration the Whiteness of his younger brother José:

> José's face got whiter and his voice angrier at my attempt to take away his white status. He screamed out strong: "I ain't no nigger! You can be if you want to be . . . . But—I—am—white! And you can go to hell!"

But Piri persisted in attacking the family, one at a time:

> "And James is blanco, too?" I asked quietly.
> "You're damn right."
> "And Poppa?"
> . . . "Poppa's the same as you," he said, avoiding my eyes, "Indian."
> "What kinda Indian," I said bitterly. "Caribe? Or maybe Borinquen? Say, José, didn't you know the Negro made the scene in Puerto Rico way back? And when the Spanish spics ran outta Indian coolies, they brought them big blacks from you know where. Poppa's got *moyeto* [Black] blood. I got it. Sis got it. James got it. And, mah deah brudder, you-all got it. . . . It's a played-out lie about me—us—being white."[4]

The structure of this painful exchange casts a bright light on the power that morphology and ancestry wield in defining races. In the racially charged United States, skin color or parentage often makes one's publicly constructed race inescapable.

Piri's dark features and José's light looks are chance in the sense that neither Piri nor José could choose their faces, or indeed their ancestry. Still, what we look like is not entirely accident; to some extent looks can be altered in racially significant ways. In this respect, consider the unfortunate popularity of hair straightening, blue contact lenses, and skin lighteners. More importantly, however, though morphology and ancestry remain largely matters of chance, those aspects of identity gain their importance on the social, not the physical, plane. Consider, now, the operation of context.

Context

Given Piri's status as a Puerto Rican with ancestral ties to three continents, there is a certain absurdity to his insistence that he is Black. This absurdity highlights the importance of context to the creation of races. Context is the social setting in which races are recognized, constructed, and contested; it is the "circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."[5] At the meta level, context includes both ideological and material components, such as entrenched cultural and customary prejudices, and also maldistributed resources, marketplace inequalities, and skewed social services. These inherited structures are altered and altered again by everything from individual actors and community movements to broad-based changes in the economic, demographic, and political landscape. At the same time, context also refers to highly localized settings. The systems of meaning regarding morphology and ancestry are inconstant and unstable. These systems shift in time and space, and even across class and educational levels, in ways that give to any individual different racial identities depending upon her shifting location. I refer to context in order to explain the phrases "historically contingent" and "socially significant" in the definition of race proffered at the start.

Changes in racial identity produced by the shifting significance of morphology and ancestry are often profoundly disconcerting, as Piri Thomas discovered. In Puerto Rico, prevailing attitudes toward racial identity situated the Thomases, as a family not light enough to be Spanish but not so dark as to be black, comfortably in the mainstream of society. They encountered no social or economic disadvantages as a result of their skin color, and were not subjected to the prejudice that usually accompanies rigid racial constructs. However, the social ideology of race in the United States—more specifically, in New York in the late 1950s—was firmly rooted in the proposition that exactly two biological races existed. Such an ideology forced the Thomas family to define themselves as either White or Black. In the context confronting Piri, "[i]t would seem indeed that . . . white and black represent the two poles of a world, two poles in perpetual conflict: a genuinely Manichean concept of the world."[6] Once in the United States, Thomas came to believe that he and his family were Black as a biological fact, irrespective of their own dreams, desires, or decisions. Yet, Thomas was not Black because of his face or parents, but because of the social systems of meaning surrounding these elements of his identity.

Consider how Thomas came to believe in his own Blackness. In a chapter entitled "How to Be a Negro without Really Trying," Thomas recalls how he and his fair-skinned Puerto Rican friend Louie applied for a sales job. Though the company told

Thomas they would call him back, they hired Louie to start Monday morning. Thomas's reflections bear repeating:

> I didn't feel so much angry as I did sick, like throwing-up sick. Later, when I told this story to my buddy, a colored cat, he said, "Hell, Piri . . . a Negro faces that all the time."
> "I know that," I said, "but I wasn't a Negro then. I was still only a Puerto Rican."[7]

Episodes of discrimination drove Piri toward a confused belief that he was Black. Aching to end the confusion, Piri traveled to the South, where he hoped to find out for sure whether his hair, his skin, and his face somehow inextricably tied him, a Puerto Rican, to Black America. Working in the merchant marine between Mobile, New Orleans, and Galveston, Piri experienced firsthand the nether world of White supremacy, and the experience confirmed his race: Bullied by his White bosses, insulted by White strangers, confronted at every turn by a White racial etiquette of violence, Thomas accepted his own Blackness. "It was like Brew said," he reflected after his time in the South, "any language you talk, if you're black, you're black."[8] Suffering under the lash of White racism, Thomas decided he was Black. Thomas's Blackness did not flow from his morphology but from traveling the mean streets of racial segregation. His dislocations suggest a spatial component to racial identities, an implication confirmed in Thomas's travel from Spanish Harlem, where he was Puerto Rican, to Long Island, where he was accused of trying to pass, to the South, where he was Black.

Piri and his family were far from the first to face the Manichean choice between White or Black. The Chinese, whose population in the United States rose fifteenfold to 105,465 in the twenty years after 1850, were also initially defined in those stark terms. Thus in Los Angeles circa 1860 the Chinese area downtown was called "Nigger Alley." During their first years in the United States, as Ronald Takaki observes, "[r]acial qualities that had been assigned to blacks became Chinese characteristics."[9] Not only were the supposed degenerate moral traits of Blacks transferred wholesale to the Chinese, but in a fascinating display of racist imagination, Whites also saw a close link between Black and Chinese morphology. Takaki cites a commentator who argued that Chinese physiognomy indicated "but a slight removal from the African race,"[10] and he reprints a startling cartoon contrasting Anglo Uncle Sam with a Chinese vampire replete with slanted eyes, but also with very dark skin, woolly hair, a flat nose, and thick lips.

In California, where the racial imagination included Mexicans and Indians as well as Blacks, Chinese were considered not only in terms of Blackness but also in terms of every non-White race, every rejected and denigrated Other. This point furnishes yet more evidence for the theory that racial identity is defined by its social context. Consider the 1879 play *The Chinese Must Go* by Henry Grimm of San Francisco. Notice the language Grimm ascribes to the Chinese characters, discussing, predictably, their nefarious anti-American plot to destroy White labor through hard work:

> *Ah Choy:* By and by white man catchee no money; Chinaman catchee heap money; Chinaman workee cheap, plenty work; white man workee dear, no work—sabee?
> *Sam Gin:* Me heep sabee.[11]

The Chinese in this Grimm play speak in the language that Whites associated with Indians and Mexicans, making Sam Gin sound remarkably like Tonto playing out the Lone Ranger's racial delusions. Thus, the Chinese were assigned not only their own peculiar stereotypes, like a fiendish desire to work for low wages, but also the degenerate characteristics of all the minorities loathed by Whites. Not coincidentally, three years after Grimm's play, the United States passed its first immigration law: The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. In a telling example of law reifying racist hysteria, the Supreme Court upheld the Chinese Exclusion Act in part by citing the threat posed by the Chinese to White labor.[12] The first Chinese, like the Thomas family nearly a century later, entered a society fixated on the idea of race and intent on forcing new immigrants into procrustean racial hierarchies.

The racial fate of Piri and the Chinese turned to a large extent on the social setting into which they immigrated. That setting provides the social meanings attached to our faces and forebears, and for this reason I write that races are groups of people bound together by historically contingent, socially significant elements of their morphology and/or ancestry. A race is not created because people share just any characteristic, such as height or hand size, or just any ancestry, for example Yoruba or Yugoslav. Instead, it is the social significance attached to certain features, like our faces, and to certain forebears, like Africans, which defines races. Context superimposed on chance largely shapes races in the United States.

Choice in Context

Piri's belief that he is Black, and his brother José's belief in his own Whiteness, can in some sense be attributed to the chance of their respective morphology and the context of their upbringing. Yet, to attribute Thomas's racial identity only to chance and context grossly oversimplifies his Blackness. Thomas's father shared not only his social context, but his dark looks as well, making context and chance equal between them. Nevertheless, his father insisted on his Whiteness, and explained this decision to Piri as follows:

> I ain't got one colored friend . . . at least one American Negro friend. Only dark ones I got are Puerto Ricans or Cubans. I'm not a stupid man. I saw the look of white people on me when I was a young man, when I walked into a place where a dark skin isn't supposed to be. I noticed how a cold rejection turned into an indifferent acceptance when they heard my exaggerated accent. I can remember the time when I made my accent heavier, to make me more of a Puerto Rican than the most Puerto Rican there ever was. I wanted a value on me, son.[13]

Thomas's father consciously exaggerated his Puerto Rican accent to put distance between himself and Black Americans. Thomas himself also made conscious and purposeful decisions, choices that in the end made him Black. As Henry Louis Gates argues, "one must *learn* to be 'black' in this society, precisely because 'blackness' is a socially produced category."[14]

Choice composes a crucial ingredient in the construction of racial identities and the fabrication of races. Racial choices occur on mundane and epic levels, for exam-

ple in terms of what to wear or when to fight; they are made by individuals and groups, such as people deciding to pass or movements deciding to protest; and the effects are often minor though sometimes profound, for instance, slightly altering a person's affiliation or radically remaking a community's identity. Nevertheless, in every circumstance choices are exercised not by free agents or autonomous actors, but by people who are compromised and constrained by the social context. Choice, explains Angela Harris, is not uncoerced choice, "freely given, but a 'contradictory consciousness' mixing approbation and apathy, resistance and resignation."[15] Nevertheless, in racial matters we constantly exercise choice, sometimes in full awareness of our compromised position, though most often not.

Perhaps the most graphic illustration of choice in the construction of racial identities comes in the context of passing. Passing—the ability of individuals to change race—powerfully indicates race's chosen nature. Not infrequently someone Black through the social construction of their ancestry is physically indistinguishable from someone White. Consider Richard Wright's description of his grandmother in *Black Boy:* "My grandmother was as nearly white as a Negro can get without being white, which means that she was white."[16] Given the prevalent presumption of essential, easily recognized phenotypical differences, light-skinned Blacks exist at an ambiguous and often unacknowledged racial border between White and Black. Those in this liminal space often respond along a range from some few who cross the established color line by "passing" to those who identify strongly with their Black status.

For most people, the pervasive social systems of meaning that attach to morphology ensure that passing is not an option. Moreover, for those who do jump races, the psychological dislocations required—suspending some personal dreams, for example childbirth; renouncing most family ties, for instance forgoing weddings and funerals; and severing all relations with the community, for example ending religious and civic affiliations—are brutal and severe. In addition, because of the depth of racial animosity in this society, passing may only succeed in distancing one from her community, not in gaining her full acceptance among Whites. In this sense, recall the words of Thomas's father: "I noticed how a cold rejection turned into an indifferent acceptance when they heard my exaggerated accent."[17] Nevertheless, some people do choose to jump races, and their ability to do so dramatically demonstrates the element of choice in the micromechanics of race.

Passing demonstrates not only the power of racial choice, however, but the contingency of the choices people make, thereby reinforcing the point that choices are made in specific contexts. Choices about racial identity do not occur on neutral ground, but instead occur in the violently racist context of American society. Though the decision to pass may be made for many reasons, among these the power of prejudice and self-hate cannot be denied. Thomas's younger brother José reveals the racist hate within him in the same instant that he claims to be White. José shouts at Piri: "I ain't black, damn you! Look at my hair. It's almost blond. My eyes are blue, my nose is straight. My motherfuckin' lips are not like a baboon's ass. My skin is white. White, goddamit! White!"[18]

José's comments are important, if painful to repeat, because they illustrate that a person's choice in the matter of race may be fatally poisoned by ambient racist an-

tipathies. Nevertheless, notice that the context in which passing occurs constantly changes. For example, it may be that in the contemporary context passing as White increasingly does not in fact require that one look White. Recently, many Anglos, committed to the pseudo-integrationist idea that ignoring race equals racial enlightenment, have seemingly adopted the strategy of pretending that the minorities they are friendly with are White. Consider the words of a White Detroit politician: "I seldom think of my girlfriend, Kathy, as black. . . . A lot of times I look at her and it's as if she is white; there's no real difference. But every now and then, it depends on what she is wearing and what we're doing, she looks very ethnic and very Black. It bothers me. I don't like it. I prefer it when she's a regular, normal, everyday kind of person."[19] Even so, passing may be far less common today than it was a hundred years ago. One observer estimates that in the half-century after the Civil War, as many as 25,000 people a year passed out of the Black race. The context in which passing occurs constantly changes, altering in turn the range of decisions individuals face.

Despite the dramatic evidence of choice passing provides, by far the majority of racial decisions are of a decidedly less epic nature. Because race in our society infuses almost all aspects of life, many daily decisions take on racial meanings. For example, seemingly inconsequential acts like listening to rap and wearing hip hop fashion constitute a means of racial affiliation and identification. Many Whites have taken to listening to, and some to performing, rap and hip hop. Nevertheless, the music of the inner city remains Black music. Rapping, whether as an artist or audience member, is in some sense a racial act. So too are a myriad of other actions taken every day by every person, almost always without conscious regard for the racial significance of their choices. It is here, in deciding what to eat, how to dress, whom to befriend, and where to go, rather than in the dramatic decision to leap races, that most racial choices are rendered. I do not suggest that these common acts are racial choices because they are taken with a conscious awareness of their racial implications, or because they compel complete shifts in racial identity. Rather, these are racial choices in their overtones or subtext, because they resonate in the complex of meanings associated with race. Given the thorough suffusion of race throughout society, in the daily dance of life we cannot avoid making racially meaningful decisions.

NOTES

1. Piri Thomas, Down These Mean Streets (1967).
2. *Id.* at 90.
3. *Id.* at 91.
4. *Id.* at 145.
5. Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1963), quoted in Renato Rosaldo, Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis 105 (1989).
6. Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks 44–45 (1967).
7. Thomas, at 108.
8. *Id.* at 187–88.
9. Ronald Takaki, Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th Century America 217 (1990).

10. *Id.*
11. Quoted in Takaki, at 221.
12. The Chinese Exclusion Case: Chae Chan Ping v. United States, 130 U.S. 581, 595 (1884).
13. Thomas, at 152.
14. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., LOOSE CANONS: NOTES ON THE CULTURE WARS 101 (1992).
15. Angela P. Harris, *Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory*, 42 STAN. L. REV. 581 (1990) (quoting T. J. Jackson Lears, *The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities*, 90 AM. HIST. REV. 567, 570 [1985]).
16. Richard Wright, BLACK BOY 48 (1966).
17. Thomas, at 152.
18. *Id.* at 144.
19. Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson & Ronald Hall, THE COLOR COMPLEX: THE POLITICS OF SKIN COLOR AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS 120 (1992).

Chapter 4

Latino/a Identity and Multi-Identity
Community and Culture

Leslie G. Espinoza

American society forces individuals to label themselves by race and gender. Not surprisingly, race and gender are the categories that correlate to power. A person's race and gender correlate to the likelihood that one will have educational opportunity, be in a particular income class, be in prison, or be the victim of a violent crime. Race and gender identity are the ways in which we are taught to articulate ourselves.

Multi-identity is not an accepted concept in dominant discourse. That discourse is about being "for us or against us," a cowboy or an Indian, an American or an alien, a woman or one of the boys, black or white, Mexican or white, Asian or white, Other or white. The politics of dichotomous categorical identity[1] require individuals to be placed into or to be forced to choose one particular defining identity. Once placed in that category, the individual is assumed to possess all the characteristics of that category, good and bad. Furthermore, that category is understood by its opposition to another category.[2]

Understanding personal identity, however, often requires the expression of multiple and distinct defining categories and the recognition of a unifying concept—the individual person. Identity may thus seem a paradox. How can there be group identity where each individual is an amalgam of unique characteristics, where each community and culture is a mix? The tension between group and individual difference has caused trouble between those with the power to put others into categories such as race, gender, or sexual preference, and those individuals pushed into socially constructed group identities that are both overinclusive and underinclusive. The choice is to assimilate or to be pushed into some distinct category of "other," whether it fits or not. This neat, blanket packaging of people both reflects and perpetuates current power structures. Of course, in reality, most individual outsiders are comfortable with the messy ambiguity of identity—when we are not thinking about it. When we try to counter the socially imposed categories and the oppression they represent, we

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