INTRODUCTION

Claudine Chiawei O’Hearn

I was walking down the street the other day, on my way home from the gym, when a large woman with wiry hair ran amok, approached me, mumbling to herself and looking somewhat deranged, as only New Yorkers can look. As she neared me, she looked me in the eye and barked, “Half-breed bitch.” I had already passed her by the time I figured out what she had said. Shocked, my first reaction was a mix of surprise and even pleasure: “How’d she know? What gave it away?” It wasn’t until a block later that I became enraged and thought of a witty retort.

I stopped being American when I first came to the States to live eight years ago. Growing up in Asia, I knew being mixed
set me apart, but I didn’t have to name it until people began to ask, Where are you from? My father was raised in a working-class Irish American family in Fall River, Massachusetts. My mother was born near Shanghai, China, but when she was seven, on the eve of the communist revolution, she and her family fled to Taiwan. They met, romantically, and I think aptly, on an airplane (my mother was a flight attendant) and soon married—though not without first encountering resistance. My father’s family were familiar with only stereotypes of Asian women, and so were not eager to invite China into the O’Hearn fold. My mother’s family felt the same and took it a step further by hiring a private detective, who fortunately was unable to dig up anything incriminating about my father. Both sides eventually got over it, so we can laugh about it now, and frequently do. Following my mother’s example, both of her sisters married Caucasians, creating a whole generation of hapas (Hawaiian for half) in our family.

My parents settled in Hong Kong, where I was born, and moved to Singapore, Belgium, and Ohio and finally settled in Taiwan. I consider these all to be home, with the exception of Akron, Ohio, where I experienced my first sting of racism when preschool classmates pushed me off playground slides, pulled tight their eyes, and idiotically chanted, “Ching, Chang, Chong, Chinese.” Early learners. As coached by my mother, I retorted, “Chinese are better.” But since these places are all home, they forfeit their definition as a single place I can come from. Suspended, I can go anywhere but home.

I don’t look especially Chinese—my eyes are wide and lidded, and my hair has a Caucasian texture and color. When my mother and I walked together, people would stare, often rudely. I could see questions in their curious looks: “Is this your daughter?” We looked incongruous. It never occurred to me that my mother and I looked any more different than any other mother and daughter; and even if we did, that it would affect how we related to each other. I don’t think I minded so much because I assumed that I would find a home in the States when I went there for college. To me, America was summer vacations, getting up at six in the morning to watch *Scooby Doo* and the rest of the Saturday morning cartoons; eating Pop Rocks and macaroni and cheese (which I would inhale in large amounts); and best of all, shopping at the mall. Coupled with what I saw in the movies, this was my small window into American life.

Because most people didn’t know where to place me, I made up stories about myself. In bars, cabs, and restaurants I would try on identities with strangers I knew I would never meet again. I faked accents as I pretended to be a Hawaiian dancer, an Italian tourist, and even once a Russian student. It always amazed me what I could get away with. Being mixed inspired and gave me license to test new characters, but it also cast me as a foreigner in every setting I found myself in.

My brother looks Chinese—70 percent to my 30 percent. And though he might dispute this, I have always felt that he was more readily accepted as being Chinese. I resented him for the ease with which he could slip into the culture, whereas I had to constantly prove and explain myself. I remember how during Chinese New Year, as tradition, we would go from house to house, eating large meals, playing mah jong, and collecting red envelopes containing untold amounts of cash that would later be gambled away. I dreaded these occasions because I felt excluded, whereas my brother, it seemed, was welcomed. Questions about what he planned to do with his life,
friends fell into two groups—the Asians and the foreigners. The biracials blended in both directions, moving between the groups, though always somewhat outside each. Looking back, I think the distinctions came more into focus as we grew older. I remember once one of my American friends let slip a racial slur, something about irreputable, gold-digging Chinese women trying to trap Western men. Appalled, I pointed to my face—the product of such “unholy” joinings. She responded, “Oh, you’re not really Chinese”—as though this were a plus.

When I came to the States for college, I became another sort of expatriate. Since I lacked the cultural tools necessary to roam undetected (knowledge of key television shows, important cultural references, even the subtle nuances of American English that you miss out on when you grow up abroad), I had to fake it and laugh at jokes I didn’t get. Luckily I was familiar with *The Simpsons*, had seen almost every episode of *The Love Boat* on videotape, and vaguely knew who Howard Stern was. I got tired of hearing, “Oh, you wouldn’t understand, you’re not from here.”

Toward the end of my first year, I went to hear Angela Davis speak. In making a point about the racism and inequality of the American educational system, she asked the white students to raise their hands if they had taken a course in black/Asian/etc. studies. A few proud students lifted their arms, and I was one of them. Then she asked the students of color to raise their hands if they had taken a course that focused on white/Western studies. Every one of them raised their hands, and the point was made. One was made for me as well, for I had hesitated, unsure whether to join them, al-
though I wasn't sure why I assumed I belonged to the first group any more than the second. I ended up raising my hand for both, looking around to see if anyone noticed. I realized that although I had been making a point all year of letting people know that I was Chinese and enjoyed surprising them, I had learned to believe that I was American/white—I didn't differentiate. Could I be both, or did one trump the other?

It's easier to be white. To be Chinese, to be half Chinese, is work. I often find myself cataloguing my emotions, manners, and philosophies into Chinese and American, wary if the latter starts to outweigh the former. Three points Asia. How can I be Chinese if I prefer David Bowie to Chinese pop, if I can more easily pass as an American, if I choose to live in New York and not return to Asia where my family still lives, if English is my first language and Chinese remains a distant second? How can I be Chinese when I struggle to communicate with my grandparents? I am unable to tell them about friends, boyfriends, life-altering experiences, beliefs, new jobs—to tell them about my life and who I have become—and the result is they don't really know me. I am ashamed to admit that there have been times I dreaded visiting them because of the humiliation of having to resort to hand gestures and second-grade Chinese.

And yet I play the part of a foreigner here all the time. I insist on not being American and tell people about the various customs that are foreign to me—Thanksgiving Day turkey and football, milk shakes, It's a Wonderful Life at Christmas, and fireworks on the Fourth of July. I remember once I got carded when I was an underage summer school student at Tufts University trying to get a drink at a T.G.I. Fridays in Boston. Undaunted, I decided to try a different tactic and re-
forgotten that you’re married to a Chinese woman?” But more important, I wonder whose racial and cultural background will match my own. I get silence for an answer.

For those of us who fall between the cracks, being “black,” being “white,” being “Chinese,” being “Latino,” is complicated. These essays, exemplary of the legion meanings of race and culture, are about inconstant categories and shifting skins. Skin color and place of birth aren’t accurate signifiers of identity. One and one don’t necessarily add up to two. Cultural and racial amalgams create a third, wholly indistinguishable category where origin and home are indeterminate. And yet, I am also reminded of a comment made by a notable mixed-race fiction writer in response to Tiger Woods’s declaration of his Asian and black heritage (and I paraphrase): “When the black truck comes around, they’re gonna haul his ass on it.”

What name do you give to someone who is a quarter, an eighth, a half? What kind of measuring stick might give an accurate estimation? If our understanding of race and culture can ripen and evolve, then new and immeasurable measurements about the uniqueness of our identities become possible.
Growing up in the Dominican Republic, I experienced racism within my own family—though I didn’t think of it as racism. But there was definitely a hierarchy of beauty, which was the main currency in our daughters-only family. It was not until years later, from the vantage point of this country and this education, that I realized that this hierarchy of beauty was dictated by our coloring. We were a progression of whitening, as if my mother were slowly bleaching the color out of her children.

The oldest sister had the darkest coloring, with very curly hair and “coarse” features. She looked the most like Papi’s side of the family and was considered the least pretty. I came next,
with “good hair,” and skin that back then was a deep olive, for I was a tomboy—another dark mark against me—who would not stay out of the sun. The sister right after me had my skin color, but she was a good girl who stayed indoors, so she was much paler, her hair a golden brown. But the pride and joy of the family was the baby. She was the one who made heads turn and strangers approach asking to feel her silken hair. She was white white, an adjective that was repeated in describing her color as if to deepen the shade of white. Her eyes were brown, but her hair was an unaccountable towheaded blond. Because of her coloring, my father was teased that there must have been a German milkman in our neighborhood. How could she be his daughter? It was clear that this youngest child resembled Mami’s side of the family.

It was Mami’s family who were really white. They were white in terms of race, and white also in terms of class. From them came the fine features, the pale skin, the lank hair. Her brothers and uncles went to schools abroad and had important businesses in the country. They also emulated the manners and habits of North Americans. Growing up, I remember arguments at the supper table on whether or not it was proper to tie one’s napkin around one’s neck, on how much of one’s arm one could properly lay on the table, on whether spaghetti could be eaten with the help of a spoon. My mother, of course, insisted on all the protocol of knives and forks and on eating a little portion of everything served; my father, on the other hand, defended our eating whatever we wanted, with our hands if need be, so we could “have fun” with our food. My mother would snap back that we looked like jibaritos who should be living out in the country. Of course, that was precisely where my father’s family came from.

Not that Papi’s family weren’t smart and enterprising, all twenty-five brothers and sisters. (The size of the family in and of itself was considered very country by some members of Mami’s family.) Many of Papi’s brothers had gone to the university and become professionals. But their education was totally island—no fancy degrees from Andover and Cornell and Yale, no summer camps or school songs in another language. Papi’s family still lived in the interior versus the capital, in old-fashioned houses without air conditioning, decorated in ways my mother’s family would have considered, well, tasteless. I remember antimacassars on the backs of rocking chairs (which were the living-room set), garish paintings of flamboyant trees, ceramic planters with plastic flowers in bloom. They were criollos—creoles—rather than cosmopolitans, expansive, proud, colorful. (Some members had a sixth finger on their right—or was it their left hand?) Their features were less aquiline than Mother’s family’s, the skin darker, the hair coarse and curly. Their money still had the smell of the earth on it and was kept in a wad in their back pockets, whereas my mother’s family had money in the Chase Manhattan Bank, most of it with George Washington’s picture on it, not Juan Pablo Duarte’s.

It was clear to us growing up then that lighter was better, but there was no question of discriminating against someone because he or she was dark-skinned. Everyone’s family, even an elite one like Mami’s, had darker-skinned members. All Dominicans, as the saying goes, have a little black behind the ears. So, to separate oneself from those who were darker would have been to divide una familia, a sacrosanct entity in our culture. Neither was white blood necessarily a sign of moral or intellectual or political superiority. All one has to do is page
through a Dominican history book and look at the number of
dark-skinned presidents, dictators, generals, and entrepreneurs
to see that power has not resided exclusively or even primarily
among the whites on the island. The leadership of our country
has been historically “colored.”

But being black was something else. A black Dominican
was referred to as a “dark Indian” (*indio oscuro*)—unless you
wanted to come to blows with him, that is. The real blacks
were the Haitians who lived next door and who occupied the
Dominican Republic for twenty years, from 1822 to 1844, a
fact that can still so inflame the Dominican populace you’d
think it had happened last year. The denial of the Afro-
Dominican part of our culture reached its climax during the
dictatorship of Trujillo, whose own maternal grandmother was
Haitian. In 1937, to protect Dominican race purity, Trujillo
ordered the overnight genocide of thousands (figures range
from 4,000 to 20,000) of Haitians by his military, who com-
mited this atrocity using only machetes and knives in order
to make this planned extermination look like a “spontaneous”
border skirmish. He also had the Dominican Republic de-
clared a white nation despite of the evidence of the mulatto
senators who were forced to pass this ridiculous measure.

So, black was not so good, kinky hair was not so good,
 thick lips not so good. But even if you were *indio oscuro con
 pelo malo y una bamba de aquí a Bani*, you could still sit in the
front of the bus and order at the lunch counter—or the equiva-
 lent thereof. There was no segregation of races in the halls of
power. But in the aesthetic arena—the one to which we girls
were relegated as females—lighter was better. Lank hair and
pale skin and small, fine features were better. All I had to do
was stay out of the sun and behave myself and I could pass as a
pretty white girl.

Another aspect of my growing up also greatly influenced
my thinking on race. Although I was raised in the heart of a
large family, my day-to-day caretakers were the maids. Most of
these women were dark-skinned, some of Haitian background.
One of them, Misiá, had been spared the machetes of the
1937 massacre when she was taken in and hidden from the
prowling *guardias* by the family. We children spent most of
the day with these women. They tended to us, nursed us when
we were sick, cradled us when we fell down and scraped an
elbow or knee (as a tomboy, there was a lot of this scraping for
me), and most important, they told us stories of *los santos* and
*el barón del cementerio*, of *el cuco* and *las ciguapas*, beautiful
dark-skinned creatures who escaped capture because their feet
were turned backwards so they left behind a false set of foot-
prints. These women spread the wings of our imaginations
and connected us deeply to the land we came from. They were
the ones with the stories that had power over us.

We arrived in Nueva York in 1960, before the large waves
of Caribbean immigrants created little Habanas, little Santo
Domingos, and little San Juans in the boroughs of the city.
Here we encountered a whole new kettle of wax—as my ma-
propping Mami might have said. People of color were treated
as if they were inferior, prone to violence, uneducated, un-
trustworthy, lazy—all the “bad” adjectives we were learning in
our new language. Our dark-skinned aunt, Tía Ana, who had
lived in New York for several decades and so was the authority
in these matters, recounted stories of discrimination on buses
and subways. These American were so blind! One drop of
black and you were black. Everyone back home would have known that Tía Ana was not black: she had “good hair” and her skin color was a light *india*. All week, she worked in a factoría in the Bronx, and when she came to visit us on Saturdays to sew our school clothes, she had to take three trains to our nice neighborhood where the darkest face on the street was usually her own.

We were lucky we were white Dominicans or we would have had a much harder time of it in this country. We would have encountered a lot more prejudice than we already did, for white as we were, we found that our Latino-ness, our accents, our habits and smells, added “color” to our complexion. Had we been darker, we certainly could not have bought our mock Tudor house in Jamaica Estates. In fact, the African American family who moved in across the street several years later needed police protection because of threats. Even so, at the local school, we endured the bullying of classmates. “Go back to where you came from!” they yelled at my sisters and me in the playground. When some of them started throwing stones, my mother made up her mind that we were not safe and began applying to boarding schools where privilege transformed prejudice into patronage.

“So where are you from?” my classmates would ask.

“Jamaica Estates,” I’d say, an edge of belligerence to my voice. It was obvious from my accent, if not my looks, that I was not from there in the way they meant being from somewhere.

“I mean originally.”

And then it would come out, the color, the accent, the cousins with six fingers, the smell of garlic.

By the time I went off to college, a great explosion of American culture was taking place on campuses across the country. The civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and subsequent peace movement, the women’s movement, were transforming traditional definitions of American identity. Ethnicity was in: my classmates wore long braids like Native Americans and peasant blouses from Mexico and long, diaphanous skirts and dangly earrings from India. Suddenly, my foreignness was being celebrated. This reversal felt affirming but also disturbing. As huipils, serapes, and embroidered dresses proliferated about me, I had the feeling that my ethnicity had become a commodity. I resented it.

When I began looking for a job after college, I discovered that being a white Latina made me a nonthreatening minority in the eyes of these employers. My color was a question only of culture, and if I kept my cultural color to myself, I was “no problem.” Each time I was hired for one of my countless “visiting appointments”—they were never permanent “invitations,” mind you—the inevitable questionnaire would accompany my contract in which I was to check off my RACE: CAUCASIAN, BLACK, NATIVE AMERICAN, ASIAN, HISPANIC, OTHER. How could a Dominican divide herself in this way? Or was I really a Dominican anymore? And what was a Hispanic? A census creation—there is no such culture—how could it define who I was at all? Given this set of options, the truest answer might have been to check off OTHER.

For that was the way I had begun to think of myself. Adrift from any Latino community in this country, my culture had become an internal homeland, periodically replenished by trips “back home.” But as a professional woman on my own, I felt less and less at home on the island. My values, the loss of my Catholic faith, my lifestyle, my wardrobe, my hippy ways,
and my feminist ideas separated me from my native culture. I did not subscribe to many of the mores and constraints that seemed to be an intrinsic part of that culture. And since my culture had always been my “color,” by rejecting these mores I had become not only Americanized but whiter.

If I could have been a part of a Latino community in the United States, the struggle might have been, if not easier, less private and therefore less isolating. These issues of acculturation and ethnicity would have been struggles to share with others like me. But all my North American life I had lived in shifting academic communities—going to boarding schools, then college, and later teaching wherever I could get those yearly appointments—and these communities reflected the dearth of Latinos in the profession. Except for friends in Spanish departments, who tended to have come from their countries of origin to teach rather than being raised in this country as I was, I had very little daily contact with Latinos.

Where I looked for company was where I had always looked for company since coming to this country: in books. At first the texts that I read and taught were the ones prescribed to me, the canonical works which formed the content of the bread-and-butter courses that as a “visiting instructor” I was hired to teach. These texts were mostly written by white male writers from Britain and the United States, with a few women thrown in and no Latinos. Thank goodness for the occasional creative writing workshop where I could bring in the multicultural authors I wanted. But since I had been formed in this very academy, I was clueless where to start. I began to educate myself by reading, and that is when I discovered that there were others out there like me, hybrids who came in a variety of colors and whose ethnicity and race were an evolving process, not a rigid paradigm or a list of boxes, one of which you checked off.

This discovery of my ethnicity on paper was like a rebirth. I had been going through a pretty bad writer’s block: the white page seemed impossible to fill with whatever it was I had in me to say. But listening to authors like Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, June Jordan, and to Lorna Dee Cervantes, Piri Thomas, Rudolfo Anaya, Edward Rivera, Ernesto Galarza (that first wave of Latino writers), I began to hear the language “in color.” I began to see that literature could reflect the otherness I was feeling, that the choices in fiction and poetry did not have to be bleached out of their color or simplified into either/or. A story could allow for the competing claims of different parts of ourselves and where we came from.

Ironically, it was through my own stories and poems that I finally made contact with Latino communities in this country. As I published more, I was invited to read at community centers and bilingual programs. Latino students, who began attending colleges in larger numbers in the late seventies and eighties, sought me out as a writer and teacher “of color.” After the publication of How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, I found that I had become a sort of spokesperson for Dominicans in this country, a role I had neither sought nor accepted. Of course, some Dominicans refused to grant me any status as a “real” Dominican because I was “white.” With the color word there was also a suggestion of class. My family had not been among the waves of economic immigrants that left the island in the seventies, a generally darker-skinned, working-class group, who might have been the maids and workers in
my mother’s family house. We had come in 1960, political refugees, with no money but with “prospects”: Papi had a friend who was the doctor at the Waldorf Astoria and who helped him get a job; Mami’s family had money in the Chase Manhattan Bank they could lend us. We had changed class in America—from Mami’s elite family to middle-class spics—but our background and education and most especially our pale skin had made mobility easier for us here. We had not undergone the same kind of race struggles as other Dominicans; therefore, we could not be “real” Dominicans.

What I came to understand and accept and ultimately fight for with my writing is the reality that ethnicity and race are not fixed constructs or measurable quantities. What constitutes our ethnicity and our race—once there is literally no common ground beneath us to define it—evolves as we seek to define and redefine ourselves in new contexts. My Latino-ness is not something someone can take away from me or leave me out of with a definition. It is in my blood: it comes from that mixture of biology, culture, native language, and experience that makes me a different American from one whose family comes from Ireland or Poland or Italy. My Latino-ness is also a political choice. I am choosing to hold on to my ethnicity and native language even if I can “pass.” I am choosing to color my Americanness with my Dominicaness even if it came in a light shade of skin color.

I hope that as Latinos, coming from so many different countries and continents, we can achieve solidarity in this country as the mix that we are. I hope we won’t shoot ourselves in the foot in order to maintain some sort of false “purity” as the glue that holds us together. Such an enterprise is bound to fail. We need each other. We can’t afford to reject the darker or lighter varieties, and to do so is to have absorbed a definition of ourselves as exclusively one thing or the other. And haven’t we learned to fear that word “exclusive”? This reductiveness is absurd when we are talking about a group whose very definition is that of a mestizo race, a mixture of European, indigenous, African, and much more. Within this vast circle, shades will lighten and darken into overlapping categories. If we cut them off, we diminish our richness and we plant a seed of ethnic cleansing that is the root of the bloodshed we have seen in Bosnia and the West Bank and Rwanda and even our own Los Angeles and Dominican Republic.

As we Latinos redefine ourselves in America, making ourselves up and making ourselves over, we have to be careful, in taking up the promises of America, not to adopt its limiting racial paradigms. Many of us have shed customs and prejudices that oppressed our gender, race, or class on our native islands and in our native countries. We should not replace these with modes of thinking that are divisive and oppressive of our rich diversity. Maybe as a group that embraces many races and differences, we Latinos can provide a positive multicultural, multiracial model to a divided America.