

In the Land of Rangers and Bears and Hispanics

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When I'm not off hiking along the foothills and mountains and greenways of Colorado, I sometimes wander around the www. I've been following, for example, the news about Ward Churchill, who was fired in July 2007 from the University of Colorado for committing various academic felonies. Most Americans question Churchill's politics, but most racial Indians question his asserted Indian racial identity. Commenting to reporter Gail Toensing of the race-based newspaper *Indian Country Today*, one leading scholar of academic Indian studies, James Riding In, decried the problem of "ethnic fraud."

Riding In is not alone in raising this concern. Another prominent adherent to racial Indianhood, Suzan Harjo, soon followed with similar sentiments in a column in *Indian Country Today*. Complaining about CU's policy of accepting self-identification of racial identity at face-value, she wondered, "What makes you think Ward Churchill is a Native person?" It is interesting to note how Harjo's point about racial identity seems intended to cover the same space in public meaning as Riding In's point about "ethnic" fraud.

I've been noticing how the terms "race" and "ethnicity" seem to display a quite companionable presence in American public discourse. They often stand together beneath the public spotlight, side-by-side in usage. I listen closely for some indication of distinction between the two terms, and at times it does appear that people intend differing meanings, but most often the words convey an air of amiable interchangeability.

Sometimes you say race; sometimes ethnicity.

I sometimes wonder whether this blurring of the line between the two terms might reflect the fact that race has been discredited as a useful way to characterize humankind. But no. "Ethnicity" seems to be comfortably settling in as just another aspect of race, or perhaps even as the new face of race, as if its meaning might well derive from the permanent and rigid laws of genetic heritability rather than from the permeable and flexible guidelines of culture.

This prospect is worrisome because ethnicity is what people experience through processes of culture, while race presumes to be a rigid description of humankind – and race has died as a scientific explanation of human biological diversity. But it would be pointless to look for evidence of the death of race in American lifeways. The signs are few indeed. And it appears that dead race is not being replaced by living ethnicity. Instead, racialism seems to have

overwhelmed ethnicity, emptying it of independent meaning and filling it up with the intentions of race. Race is dead, but rather than do the necessary work to come up with another world, we've merely come up with another word.

I often wonder what a non-racial "another world" might look like. I peer beyond the grave of racialism, looking for what will come next. I don't know what to expect on the other side of race, but every so often I think I do catch glimpses of the world that will follow the world of race. In pursuit of this elusive future, I made an interesting discovery about myself in the early summer of 2005.

Forsaking the internet to hike one afternoon in the mountains under towering thunderclouds with my wife Linda, we paused to chat with a park ranger. At the end of the path, crossing a narrow rustic bridge over a creek that tumbled toward the end of the day, the ranger waved at us.

I didn't want to stop. Earlier, heading up the winding path, I'd seen the questionnaire in her hand. Another ranger stood nearby with a captive couple, writing earnestly on a clipboard. "Let's say no and keep going," I suggested. But Linda was in a good mood and didn't mind stopping.

"Would you mind taking a few minutes to help me with this questionnaire?"

"Okay," said Linda to the ranger, flashing a friendly smile.

The ranger stood before us, her clipboard poised for action. This was official Park business but she nevertheless expected a rebuff, polite or otherwise. The clipboard, if needed, would thwart the worst vibes. Studying her face, she was older than us and it was late in the day. She looked tense and tired. Maybe she'd been counting bears all day in the forest and they hadn't been very cooperative.

It was a lengthy questionnaire. Beginning with "What did you enjoy about the park?" and working on down to the punchline: "Would you be willing to pay more in entrance fees?" Linda answered carefully, as if sworn in. I stood nearby, trying not to look like I might turn rude at any moment, another surly bear. I watched as the ranger checked off each query.

"What race are you?" She turned away from Linda and looked at me, shaking me out of my reverie.

I'd been pondering what to say when she got to the question about race, running over some possible responses. I knew Linda would want me to keep it simple. I usually do. It seems rude when chatting casually with people to blow up all their ideas about race in the midst of a few pleasantries. What would I say this time? Was this a casual conversation? Or was it official business?

I couldn't decide, and I didn't really want to be rude. "What do you think, Linda?" I'd leave the whole thing to her.

But either there's not much to say, or there's too much. "I don't know," she said, "Go ahead and tell her if you want!"

Now I had Linda's permission. I could go after this ranger's expectations and blow away everything she thought about race if I wished. I tapped my chin, picturing how it would go. But it was hopeless. I threw up my hands like a bear standing up to growl at the sun. "Let's just not answer that one!"

"Okay," Linda laughed.

"We don't have an answer for that, so let's skip it."

This was just what the ranger had expected and she felt very clever because she had indeed read us right. She expected us to treat her like a door-to-door sales rep. But the conversation had gotten weird in an unusual and mysterious way.

Okay. She had faced worse; she would persevere. There were bears in this forest that could turn your bones to water with their fearsome charging answers to questions. This was nothing!

No choice, she wrote. She had been prepared to check a square and it was a little inconvenient because now she had to write something that couldn't be readily compiled – where would this go in the carefully gathered and sorted statistics that would provide the science behind the coming increase in park fees?

"Okay. Are you Hispanic? That's ethnicity, not race!" Her lips pursed with satisfaction. The ranger had countered my vaguely emotional tone with her sense of logic. This war could be won. We'll get those bears counted no matter what!

Relenting, I watched her win. It's nice to see people win; I like the look in their eyes. The ranger tapped the clipboard with her pencil to drive home certain incontestable finalities, a victorious glint in her eyes.

On that note, we finished the interview and she let us go.

But something very complex also happened. Every so often in the days and weeks and months that followed, I paused with whatever I was doing to think about ethnicity and the idea of being Hispanic.

Am I Hispanic?

The ranger had distinguished race from ethnicity; in her mind the two were not the same thing – maybe her use implied that "Hispanic" could avoid being biologically racial. Maybe it could be strictly a cultural construction.

But how can I not be Hispanic if it is purely cultural? Standing there at the end of the path observing the ranger as she finished up with her random survey of visitors to the park, I thought back to my youth.

During the 1960s, when the park ranger was also young, I dwelt upon the Enchanted Isle with my family. I swam in the living sea and dipped my hands into the bubbling sand and listened to the ever-present humid trade winds and to the surf like wind in a sunken undersea forest. Upon green seaweed pathways I wandered. And I dearly loved eating the national dish of that far-off realm. I miss it even today. Maybe there's a hollow place inside me that will never be filled.

How could I not be Hispanic after that?

In the Land of Enchantment in 1972, I saw a film about the unforgettable poetry of Pablo Neruda and he became my favorite poet through the years that followed. *No Hay Olvido....* Okay Pablo; go ahead and keep murmuring your sad, beautiful sonata. But sometimes memory is short. Forgetting is long.

Who am I after all these years?

You see, if ethnicity is not race, if ethnicity is a cultural reality that is truly not biologically determined, then the rules of culture have the final say over the character of ethnic identity. According to this logic, we must acknowledge that the idea of being Hispanic comes not from genes, but from exposure to culture.

One can argue that very few Americans, if any, can truthfully assert the total absence of Hispanic cultural ethnicity. To assert that some of us may not be Hispanic is to deny the seeping soaking fluidity of culture. It gets everywhere in your world. You just can't keep it out of all your little nooks and crannies. And once it's there, you can't get rid of it. Pablo Neruda and rice & beans and the Land of Enchantment and the Enchanted Island cannot be made to vanish from my soul.

Embracing this mode of communal Hispanicness means turning aside from the false idea that race is genetic. We would defeat the idea that ethnicity should be like race, somehow biological rather than the cultural thing it really is.

If ethnicity is truly race-free, then it is a word that usefully evokes the vast complexity and infinitely meaningful details of our cultural selves. We can enrich ourselves constantly through our cultural experiences, and the experience of cultural diversity can give us many ways of being ourselves. We need this kind of ethnicity at the center of our discussions about identity and culture. With race-free ethnicity in hand, we can fill up the old oppressive usages of race with new usages – we can empower ourselves with liberating choices.

Working my way slowly through this logic, thinking back to the ranger's survey, I finally concluded that I must be Hispanic. I am Hispanic if we do not artificially warp the concept of ethnicity with misplaced racial biology. Setting aside the biological imperatives that dominate the practice of race, the outcome is

clear for ethnicity. We must identify ourselves according to our cultural experiences.

Having learned something interesting about myself, I wanted to go back to the eaves of that forest and speak again to the ranger and her clipboard. Maybe I shouldn't have let her win. Maybe I should have flung out my paws to maul her gnarled conception of things.

Returning to the internet several years later and glimpsing online the latest news regarding Ward Churchill, I don't approve of engaging in unapologetic distortions of history and scholarship. I do not approve of distorting selfhood and scholarship with pseudo-scientific bioracialism.

I advocate replacing race with ethnicity – ethnicity free of bioracialism. With this logic in hand, like the University of Colorado, I accept Churchill's self-description as an Indian. He doesn't need any "Indian blood" or citizenship in any racially defined "Indian tribe" to claim an Indian cultural identity.

I like the idea of treating race as ethnicity because this recalibration of race will lead inevitably to its end. Lacking useful biological authenticity tests, artifacts of racial culture like racial Indianhood and racial Hispanicness will become impossible to define and defend. These and other citadels of racial identity will gradually slip away into a future without race.

For now, however, among racial Indians Ward Churchill is widely regarded as a spurious Indian, a wannabe. As James Riding In observed to Toensing, philosophers of Indian studies worry about the presence of "non-Indian cheaters" in their midst. These self-identified Indians stand accused of lacking the essential genetic credentials for their asserted racial Indianhood. In other words, they might well be white people posing as phony Indians.

But it is race itself that is phony.

Acknowledging this truth, we soon arrive at another conclusion that has vast implications for scholars and racial scholarship. Since race represents a phony warping of humankind, scholarship that unquestioningly enacts bioracialism must also be phony. And Indian studies programs simply aim at advancing race when they choose to study the doings of Indians rather than the doings of adherents to racial Indianhood. This traditional mode of Indian studies is compelled by the warping imperatives of race to deform human history. Race creates a profound problem for historical storytelling and for our sense of historical self-awareness.

When scholarship proceeds on the basis of assuming that race is a valid biological interpretation of humankind, and when scholars of race engage in the admitted practice of the lie of racialism... well, for the moment, no university treats the unabashed promotion of bioracial discourse as a problem. No

university disqualifies practitioners of the delusion of race from passing along intact the delusion of race. Listing Ward Churchill's crimes against the academy, no one thought it pertinent to challenge Ward Churchill's credentials on the basis of his willingness to embrace and promote the bogus idea of race.

As I see it, James Riding In and Suzan Harjo and Ward Churchill are sibling proponents of American racialism. In their disagreements, they seem to espouse conflicting cultural ideologies, but this is an illusion. The pseudo-biological sap of race runs true in their veins. Their debate-like arguments represent minor matters of spirited internecine competition, a heated sibling rivalry. In reality, they have together labored mightily to advance the great American enterprise of passing along the precepts of race to future generations.

And they have succeeded in this effort. Their success in this shared enterprise comes with the full blessing and support of the American academic community. Rather than subject openly racist scholars to thorough scrutiny for perpetrating outmoded pseudo-science, the academy instead rewards such scholars with degrees, professorships, and promotions. Faith-based belief in race continues unabated in the academy as a guiding academic truth despite the recognition in science that race distorts the truth of human biological diversity.

Perceiving these awful truths, I laugh at myself for dwelling on the comparatively insignificant matter of one hardworking ranger and her clipboard. And for me to depict bears as pointlessly surly, as vicious... well, it is really race that is heartlessly vicious. Grisly race is beastly the way it cares nothing for the nature of humankind.

Doing race, every racist has the help of highly educated racist horribilists who wield their awesome strength to run roughshod over what it means to be human. For the moment, racism has the power to not only bestow upon its adherents academic success, it also publishes newspapers and it creates surveys that believe in race and it labors to distort ethnicity into race.

Even so, I have little doubt that someday some of us – and eventually, many of us – will find ways to free ourselves from race. And being free, we will return to the forest much wiser than when we left it. And filling out our questionnaires in that future, we will know what to say when it comes to race and ethnicity, and when we consider the nature of our humanity.

Permitting race to slip away into ethnicity and on into the graveyard of discredited ideas, in the future we'll get on with more useful pursuits. I feel certain that in the end we'll get those bears counted no matter what.