**Mixed Messages:**

**Reflections on Multiethnic Identity and Narratives in the Classroom**

Joel Mayward

I want to being by sharing two stories featuring personal conversations about my ethnic identity, both from within the world of academic theology. First, a job search: I am a graduate student sitting on a committee interviewing a potential faculty member for the seminary I attend. The Latina candidate asks if her children will feel like outsiders living in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. For all of its ostensibly liberal progressiveness, much of this corner of America still remains entrenched within ideologies of white supremacy and systemic racism. She is (rightly) asking if her children will be safe here. The other committee members (all of whom are white) cannot really answer knowledgably, so I reply that I am Mexican-American, that my mother is Chicana mixed with Cherokee, that I have experience with Latinx culture in our Northwest context. She listens, but then sighs and replies, “Yeah, but you don’t *present* as Latino. You pass.” She moves on to the next interview question. And I understand. My freckled skin and lack of discernable accent allow me privileges within white-dominated circles. I am not Latino enough for her. My experiences do not apply here. I pass.

A second conversation: I am in a probationary review meeting for my PhD research at the nexus of theology, philosophy, and film studies. Two white male faculty ask about my vocational aspirations. I reply that I hope to be a professor, a pastor-theologian who is able to build bridges between the church and the academy. With a knowing wink, the elder man—a renowned senior theologian in the U.K.—says that I will struggle as a white male to find a job in the humanities, that universities are sadly looking more to women and people of color as token diversity hires. Taken aback, I reply that I am Mexican-American, that my mother is Chicana mixed with Cherokee, that my research includes and values Latinx theological perspectives not out of tokenism but out of joy in my heritage. The mood in the room changes. The elder professor shifts uncomfortably in his seat while the younger man looks downward in silence. In a dismissive tone, the elder professor then openly questions whether my interdisciplinary project can even be considered “theology” at all due to its focus on film and not the normative Christian systematic texts he values. And I understand. My freckled skin and lack of discernable accent no longer allow me privileges within this white-dominated circle. I am not white enough for him. I have exposed his prejudice. I no longer pass.

I am freckled, spotted, mixed. I am the “Other” in both of these conversations. I am too Brown for white people and too white for Brown people. As a phenotypically white Latino man of mixed ethnicity, I do not have a clear place at either racial table, yet I belong to both worlds. I am permanently in-between.

But I am not alone: from 2010 to 2020, the multiracial population in the United States grew from about 9 million (2.9% of the population) to 33.8 million people (10.2% of the population), an increase of 276%. [[[1]](#endnote-1)] And this population continues to grow, with at least one estimate being that around 20% of the US population will be mixed-race by 2050. These are not mere statistics, for such statistics represent stories. I have thus begun with my own story because such an approach reflects the personal and poetic practice I wish to propose: namely, the practice of sharing the story of my multiethnic identity within youth ministry education contexts, and how sharing such stories can prove to be beneficial and empowering for students all across the ethnic/racial and gender/sexual spectrums.

Such storytelling is in the spirit of feminist queer cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa. Though not a professional theologian, Anzaldúa’s views regarding spirituality, identity, and epistemology bear theological resonance, and have been adopted by U.S. Hispanic theologians. Her foundational 1987 book *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is a semi-autobiographical collection of prose and poems written in both Spanish and English. As a meditation on growing up in southern Texas, *Borderlands* explores the borders—both literal and metaphorical—between various people groups and realities, including the borders of material and spiritual realms. Of significance in Anzaldúa’s work is the word *nepantla*, a term of indigenous Aztec origins meaning “in-between space” or “at home in the middle.” She uses *nepantla* to describe the experience of living as a Chicana lesbian woman on the Texas-Mexican *frontera* following the long history of colonialism in Latin America. Anzaldúa poetically describes this liminal borderland existence as “seeing double” from two different cultural perspectives simultaneously, a state of being beyond either/or binaries. [[[2]](#endnote-2)]

I want to place Anzaldúa’s concept of *nepantla* in dialogue with philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s concepts of “the social imaginary” and “narrative identity” before turning to my own experiences in teaching Christian college students in order to demonstrate how these concepts can be applied by multiethnic educators and youth ministry practitioners. I will seek to anchor my more theoretical and theological reflections within my personal multiethnic Latino adoptee identity. Being simultaneously a person of color and white, I am able to “see double,” which has both its strengths and challenges as I aim to disciple young people in the ways of Christ—what I have to share here are “mixed messages” in a variety of ways. Ultimately, I hope that sharing my story of self-understanding and appreciation of my “mixed” heritage can open up dialogue for how multiethnic individuals might serve as bridge-builders between cultures and generations, as well as create generative educational spaces both within and beyond the traditional classroom.

**Gloria Anzaldúa: *Nepantleras***

Anzaldúa’s unfinished PhD dissertation posthumously published in 2015 as *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro* promotes an “aesthetics of transformation” grounded in Anzaldúa’s “metaphysics of interconnectedness.” In her project, Anzaldúa seeks to decolonize reality itself, to articulate an epistemology and ontology beyond Eurocentric racially-infused abstract concepts. A central term for this project is *nepantla*. Anzaldúa describes *nepantla* as “a psychological liminal space between the way things had been and an unknown future. *Nepantla* is the space in-between, the locus and sign of transition […] the bridge between the material and the immaterial; the point of contact *y el lugar* between ordinary and spirit realities […] a place where we can accept contradiction and paradox.” [[[3]](#endnote-3)] People living in *nepantla*, what Anzaldúa calls *nepantleras*, are “threshold people, those who move within and among multiple worlds and use their movement in the service of transformation.” [[[4]](#endnote-4)] *Nepantleras* can see reality through a “perspective from the cracks” outside of binary either/or thinking. To quote Anzaldúa: “Dwelling in liminalities, in-between states or nepantlas, las nepantleras cannot be forced to stay in one place, locked into one perspective or perception of things or one picture of reality. […] Nepantleras are not constrained by one culture or world but experience multiple realities.” [[[5]](#endnote-5)] With their unique world-bridging capabilities, *nepantleras* are “agents of awakening” and “spiritual activists” who “model the transitions our cultures will go through, carry visions for our cultures, preparing them for solutions to conflicts and the healing of wounds.” [[[6]](#endnote-6)]

What makes *nepantla* theologically significant in my view is the paradox of two natures or identities becoming genuinely unified while remaining wholly distinct. This is not simply hybridization, miscegenation, or syncretism. Rather, to live in *nepantla* is to simultaneously exist within two worlds and identities, an impossible reality made possible in a concrete person. This has obvious significance for the doctrine of Christology, as it may describe the hypostatic union without using English language or paradigms. As one such example of applying *nepantla* to theology, Michelle Gonzalez suggests *nepantla* as an alternative to the term *mestizaje* in Latina theological anthropology, acknowledging *mestizo*’s significance in Hispanic history while also pointing out its negative connotations. *Nepantla* is appealing to Gonzalez because “it implies plurality without limiting the origin of that plurality.” [[[7]](#endnote-7)] Gonzalez continues, quoting theologian Orlando Espin: “*Nepantla* is a relational term […] If we could try an English equivalent, it would be something like: ‘there where abundant dialogue occurs,’ or ‘there where relationships happen,’ or ‘there where we are both-and.’ *Nepantla* is a distinctly Latina/o contribution emerging from our non-European origins.” [[[8]](#endnote-8)]

This *nepantlera* identity carries challenges with it for multiethnic people, both personally and socially. In her book on multiethnic identity, *Mixed Blessing*, Chandra Crane writes about the embodied and cognitive dissonance experienced by those with a multiracial heritage, namely that we simultaneously carry the oppressor *and* the oppressed in our bodies, that our very identities and beings contain an spiritual inner conflict:

For many of us mixed folks, our visible characteristics—our phenotypes—don’t fit the cultural norms that divide people into ‘red and yellow, black and white.’ So we embody slaves *and* masters, colonizers *and* indigenous people, vulnerable immigrants *and* privileged gatekeepers, all in the face of one person. We see the hostility of centuries every time we look in the mirror. [[[9]](#endnote-9)]

Crane goes on to share a story about how her Christian organization created breakout sessions based on minority ethnicities at a new-staff orientation, a gesture intending inclusion. However, this created a problem for Crane: as an adoptee of mixed ethnicity, she found herself feeling stuck in the quickly-emptying beige hallway, torn about which room to enter and where she belonged. She writes, “in my physical, visible *otherness*, I was physically and visibly lost.” [[[10]](#endnote-10)] To be multiethnic is to perpetually wrestle with questions of both identity *and* belonging, of *who am I?* and *whom do I belong with?*, questions which strongly resonate with any adolescent in their own identity development (I will share more on this in a later section), and which are continually near the surface for mixed-race individuals of any age or stage.

Beyond how we see ourselves in the mirror, multiethnic individuals also face social challenges. There can be negative (mis)perceptions of *cultural appropriation* (capitalizing on or stealing from another culture without giving credit), *code-switching* (shifting our behavior according to different contexts or circumstances), and *passing* (being accepted, or representing oneself successfully, as a member of a different ethnic or racial group). [[[11]](#endnote-11)] Perhaps some multiethnic folks are guilty of such practices and postures; more likely, those with a mixed heritage are anxious and self-aware about how they are being perceived in any given social context precisely because of their uncategorizable ethnic identity. There is an experiential sense of not feeling “at home” anywhere, of being stuck in the beige hallway with nowhere to go.

So how can one’s multiethnic identity be understood as a source of strength within social contexts? How can *nepantleras* truly be bridge-builders between worlds and help others to “see double.” In order to address these questions, I wish to turn to a perhaps surprising source: French philosopher Paul Ricoeur and his concepts of “social imaginary” and “narrative identity.”

**Paul Ricoeur: Social Imaginaries and Narrative Identities**

What is a social imaginary (or social imagination)? For philosopher Charles Taylor, a social imaginary is “the ways in which [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations;” that is, an “ensemble of imaginings that enable our practices by making sense of them.” [[[12]](#endnote-12)] This is not a “theory” or “worldview,” which suggests an abstract objectivity and coherence. Nor is it mere fantasy or fiction, a kind of wishful thinking. Rather, this is an *imagination-in-practice* which informs and inhabits our habits, stories, disciplines, gestures, and social patterns, i.e. our messy-and-real way of being in the world together. And this is a *social* imaginary—all human beings exist within and inhabit a particular sociocultural context and community which inevitably shapes our values, language, and loves, including our value of, language about, and love for God.

Taylor gets this notion from Paul Ricoeur, specifically his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*. [[[13]](#endnote-13)] In his lectures, Ricoeur suggests that the conjunction of these ostensibly disparate phenomena (i.e., “ideologies” and “utopias”) typifies what he calls a social and cultural imagination, or a *social imaginary*. At the risk of oversimplifying, I will summarize that, for Ricoeur, the social imaginary consists of both *ideology* and *utopia*, which share an *internal* and *external* polarity of a *positive* and *negative* function; in other words, there is a dialectic both *within* and *between* the two concepts. Ideology, at its worst, is a *distortion* of reality—it can become an unreal, unreasonable, a-theological upending of our individual understanding of What Is. Simply put, ideology can become belief in lies. However, Ricoeur also suggests that ideology has a more positive function as *integration*: because all social action is symbolically mediated and enculturated—as human beings, we are always situated in a culture filled with meaningful signs and symbols—an ideology plays a stabilizing role by preserving personal and social identity. That is, our ideology confirms and affirms The Way Things Are, our collective understanding of truth and knowledge. Ideology, in Ricoeur’s view, thus functions as a dialectic between distortion and integration, between powerful authorities (whether political, religious, or otherwise) telling us how things are (regardless of their veracity), and the stable continuity of our individual and communal identities and traditions. Such integration could be called “faith” for Christians. Faith is trust in divine promises and obedience to divine commands. Faith is not simply believing in something without proof or reason, but trusting in someone in a participatory and dynamic way based upon the very real God who has demonstrated faithfulness to us in Christ. This faith is joyfully assenting to God with our entire lives, entrusting our very selves into God’s loving care. Such faith, if done in community, forms a faith tradition which provides support, education, formation, and care.

If ideology at its best is integration, for Ricoeur, the best function of utopia is the exploration of “the possible.” At its worst, utopia is abstract wishful thinking, an escapist illusion which distracts us from the reality at hand. The utopian impulse questions what presently exists and imagines fresh possibilities in its place. In this way, utopia introduces imaginative variations on how we interpret society, family, government, religion, God, etc. and subversively questions the reigning normative systems in power. Utopia provides a beneficial counterpart to ideology—it is The Way Things Could (or Should) Be as opposed to The Way Things Are. In this way, the “possibility” of utopia is akin to Christian hope. Hope is the mean between presumption and despair, a holy anticipation that the faithful God who has made promises in the past will fulfill those promises for good in the future.

It may be justified to describe the positive sides of ideology and utopia as a dialectic between “faith” and “hope” as expressed within the wider Christian tradition, all of which leads to a social imaginary rooted in “love.” By Christian “tradition,” I mean the ongoing conversation of interpretations and practices in specific Christian communities and cultural contexts. This conversation—this *theology*, literally “speaking of God”—is simultaneously consistent yet always changing, a flow of beliefs and practices which adapt to new generations while also maintaining a narrative identity (more on this in a moment). Ricoeur ultimately claims that this polarity between ideology and utopia “may exemplify the two sides of [social] imagination.” He concludes that we cannot escape the hermeneutical (i.e. interpretive) circle of ideology and utopia; yet this hermeneutical circle is not a “vicious tautology” where we are trapped, but rather a spiral of liberating wisdom towards maturity, justice, and love. As we look back to the past to discern God’s actions in human history (faith), we also look forward to the good and certain future marked by God’s promises in Christ (hope), which then forms our present-day practices and postures towards God and neighbor (love). I find that the “social imaginary” serves as a very helpful alternative to the problematic notion of “worldview” so often employed in certain circles within American evangelicalism. [[[14]](#endnote-14)]

The social imagination relates to a second Ricoeurian concept, that of “narrative identity.” [[[15]](#endnote-15)] For Ricoeur, the narrative identity is to answer the question “who?” by telling the story of a person’s or a community’s life, what he calls “emplotment.” In other words, we not only *have* stories we tell about ourselves—we *are* living stories, and are always situated within other ongoing narratives, both individually and communally. Stories shape our identities. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre put it this way in *After Virtue*: “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” [[[16]](#endnote-16)] That is, stories operate as wayfinders and compasses: they help us orient ourselves in our families, our churches, and our wider world—they give us scripts to follow. To paraphrase Ricoeur, every human existence is a life in quest of a narrative. Ricoeur came to see “narrative” as a larger umbrella term for understanding not only how to read texts, but how to “read” cultural artifacts, politics, institutions, selves, and even God. Ricoeur was a proponent of a kind of “narrative theology,” one which saw God’s larger redemptive Story of salvation history (mainly seen in both Scripture and in Jesus Christ) as being the authoritative story for our own individual stories of faith. [[[17]](#endnote-17)] That is, my narrative identity as a multiethnic *nepantlera* is located within the larger Story that God is authoring throughout time and history, and this story in turn informs and is informed by a Christian social imaginary—the practices, values, and symbols of the Christian community who are faithfully and hopefully following the Love that is God.

The concept of “narrative” and its application in youth ministry is certainly not a novel concept, especially regarding “story-based” approaches to pedagogy, preaching, and evangelism. Indeed, the fundamentals of what I am suggesting are quite basic and perhaps intuitive for those leading and serving within youth ministry contexts. [[[18]](#endnote-18)] However, it seems to me that Ricoeur’s view of narrative as being a fundamental structure for human existence and ontology, and thus its significance for identity formation, is an underexplored concept and practice within youth ministry. I am suggesting that our youth ministry imaginations ought to become more Ricoeurian: beyond just using personal stories as illustrations within our teaching and preaching with younger generations, how might “narrative” be a foundational lens for how we imagine the world and ourselves? Beyond simply promoting a “Christian” or “biblical” *worldview* through apologetics-based arguments and propositions, how might our *social imaginaries*—our communal values, practices, desires, etc.—be shaped by the larger Story found in the gospel of Jesus Christ? That is, how might our narrative identities shape our social imaginaries, and vice versa?

**Multiethnic Identity and Belonging in Youth Ministry**

So what does all of the above theoretical and philosophical stuff have to do with multiethnic identity in the youth ministry classroom? I will seek to make the connection clearer by sharing three personal stories.

First, a few years ago, I was serving as a chaplain for a high school theology summer camp led by a handful of seminary and Christian ministries faculty from my university. The camp was intentionally multicultural, and the group of high school-aged students in attendance was thus quite diverse for our particular context. [[[19]](#endnote-19)] One Latino student stood out to me due to his quiet and reserved spirit. Though he was engaged in activities and discussions without reluctance, he seemed to be more of an observer than a participant, as if something were holding him back. During a period of time in between programmed sessions and on our way to a meal (I have found that these “in between” times are often the most fruitful in terms of relationship-building and spiritual formation), I made my way to the student, pacing alongside him as the group walked to our destination. As I asked him questions about how the camp was going so far, he politely responded to my queries, his guard still apparently up. The conversation turned to family, and he mentioned he had a lot of younger siblings. I then shared about my Latina mother being a middle child of over a dozen children, and how she bridged what was essentially two generations of siblings, how this was a challenge for her even as she loved being part of such a large family growing up in a small rural town. I mentioned that I was a multiethnic Latino, even though people might not assume this due to my freckled skin and lack of perceptible accent. As he listened to me share about my mom and my Latino heritage, he become visibly more relaxed, even relieved; it was as if a spiritual pressure valve had been released. He then began to share about his own parents and the tension he felt from being devoted to them while also feeling a vocational call into full-time pastoral ministry, how he was also growing up in a small rural town and felt torn between staying home and leaving for college. And I understood—his discovery that I had an ethnic background (a narrative identity) which resonated with his own identity and experiences (a social imaginary) opened up the possibility for us to share in one another’s lives and stories in meaningful ways, ways that perhaps would not have happened had I not initiated in sharing my own story. Indeed, our intersecting stories created a generative space for spiritual formation and vocational discernment to take place on a much deeper level. For the remainder of the week of camp, he would seek me out to share what he was learning and processing; he also came further out of his shell around the other campers.

A second story: I was invited to speak at a university chapel service, with the chosen passage being Acts 6, the story of the neglected widows in the early Jerusalem church. I began my message with my story of being a multiethnic adoptee, born to a Hispanic woman in Texas then raised in a middle-class white family in the Pacific Northwest. I spoke of the underlying tension that I belong to both worlds, yet I did not fit in either. I simultaneously have a seat at the table and am not sure where to sit. Beneath all of this is the big question of belonging: belonging means being with people who are safe, who resonate with us, who have shared experiences and values and perspectives. This question of belonging is one of those “big questions” asked by teenagers and young adults: where do I fit, and what is my connection with others? [[[20]](#endnote-20)] Yet as a multiethnic adoptee, I am permanently in-between. After describing how the early church in Acts had to navigate such questions of belonging and service, I concluded with a return to my multiethnic adoptee background—how the more I explore, the more I find my belonging in the person of Jesus. Jesus himself was an adoptee with his earthly father, Joseph the carpenter, raising this non-biological son of divine origins. He was also multiethnic, from Israelite, Canaanite, and Moabite origins (I told the students that genealogies in the Bible really do matter!). Afterwards, one student came up and thanked me, as he was also biracial and found that he sometimes struggled with feeling like he belonged to more than one community, both at home and on campus. “I’m white and I’m Black,” he said, “and my different friends don’t understand. I just don’t quite fit in anywhere.” I affirmed the disorientation he felt, then began to share about how his multiethnic identity was a beautiful gift, one which Jesus himself embodies in his own humanity. The tears forming in the corners of the student’s eyes told me that this resonated deeply with his spirit: he had never before considered how his belonging in the body of Christ included his multiethnic heritage. His social imaginary had been transformed—the Way Things *Truly* Are (ideology as integration) differed from the Way Things Seemed To Be (ideology as distortion). He imagined that his biracial identity was a hindrance to his spiritual formation and belonging, that it was a tragedy, when in fact his multiethnicity was a God-given gift and strength. As Chandra Crane writes, for multiethnic people, the theological notion of “identity in Christ” can create particular difficulties if we imagine Christ as being “pure” (i.e., ethnically “unmixed”). “Even when Jesus is accurately portrayed as a nonwhite ethnic ‘minority’ with dark skin, hair, and eyes, he is still perceived as being monoethnic, not mixed. So when we mixed folks are struggling with our various identities…Christ can all-too-often be held up falsely as a paragon of monoethnic wholeness and unity for us to emulate.” [[[21]](#endnote-21)] Yet this is inaccurate in terms Our imaginations need to be transformed: “being in Christ doesn’t mean losing our humanity and distinctiveness; it means reclaiming it.” [[[22]](#endnote-22)] That is, wholeness and integrity in one’s self does not require a monocultural or monoethnic identity—the multiethnic Christ offers an image of a renewed humanity within his multiethnic body.

My final story: I led a cohort of college students participating in a leadership development program at my university built around two different scholarships affiliated with multicultural leadership and first-gen students of color. This particular group of students had begun college during the Covid-19 pandemic, and they showed signs of weariness from the mental and emotional toll this global crisis had brought upon them. I initially struggled to lead the cohort, as I was a relatively new faculty member and they had already had two years of shared experiences together; there remained a invisible barrier between us that I could not seem to penetrate. I have been doing research on the role of storytelling in spiritual formation of youth and young adults, and had come across the work of psychologists Marshall Duke and Robyn Fivush. Through their research, they discovered that there was a correlation between storytelling and emotional health—children and adolescents who knew the stories of their family (origins, cultural practices, family successes and losses, etc.) had a stronger sense of self and an inner resiliency. [[[23]](#endnote-23)] Young people who knew these stories and could articulate them showed a higher development in variety of areas (self-esteem, academic success, mental health, social competence). Mark Yaconelli describes the significant of this research: “It wasn’t just the accumulation of various historical facts that made children competent and resilient; it was the relationships and interactions in which these stories were communicated that strengthened a child.” [[[24]](#endnote-24)] Building upon this idea, I led the college student cohort through a storytelling exercise, where we went through Duke and Fivush’s “Do You Know?” scale, a list of twenty questions designed to evaluate how well people knew the stories of their family. [[[25]](#endnote-25)] After the students had taken time to work through the questions, I invited us to have a conversation where we could share some of our family stories and how they’ve shaped us. I began the discussion with sharing my story of meeting my birth mother and learning more about my Latino heritage, as well as how the stories of two families—my adoptive family and my biological family—intersect and live within me. By being the first to share my narrative identity, it helped create a sacred educational space where students could safely hare their personal stories—in hindsight, I can see that I was serving as a *nepantlera* who was building spiritual and emotional bridges between students through my guidance into storytelling. Thus, through the sharing and receiving of these personal stories about their family of origin, students grew not only in their self-awareness, but also in how their stories could be understood (i.e., imagined) as valuable resources for spiritual and emotional resilience when facing difficult circumstances or leadership obstacles. That is, the social imaginary of this multiethnic and multicultural cohort was transformed through the sharing of individual narrative identities.

**Conclusion: Making a Home in the Hallway**

The original subtitle of this paper speaks about how multiethnic identities in the “classroom.” However, in my actual reflection and writing of the paper, I have discovered that the most potent and powerful moments in sharing about my multiethnic identity have not been within the traditional classroom setting, but rather within alternative educational spaces (a walk to dinner, after a chapel service, a cohort workshop). Perhaps one relevant application of the above reflections is the necessary reimagining of what a “classroom” entails; that is, where and how do people best learn and grow in self-awareness and spiritual maturity? How might new educational environments shape our narrative identities and social imaginaries for the better? And in our era of tribalism and incivility surrounding politics and religion, what can we learn from the *nepantleras* among us who are natural bridge-builders in their very embodied selves? To return to the image of being stuck in a beige hallway with nowhere to belong, Crane writes about a Korean American transracial adoptee who experienced a similar dilemma. She quotes the mentor of this woman: “If the hallway is your home, just decorate it! Here you have access to all the rooms; you can come and go. It’s okay if that’s where you are.” [[[26]](#endnote-26)] It’s a beautiful, empowering image for those of us feeling like ethnic nomads—there is a place for us which we can call “home.” Indeed, *nepantleras* are hallway-dwellers and decorators, making their home in the in-between spaces and transforming the beige hallways (and classrooms) into beautifully colorful and diverse spaces which reflect the diversity expressed in the kingdom of heaven (cf. Revelation 7:9–12).

I wish to conclude with Maria P.P. Root’s “Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People,” which I have found to be an empowering statement for both myself and for students with multiethnic identities. May it be a clear manifesto and a comforting prayer for those of us who have received mixed messages all our lives about our ethnic heritage, and who may need to reimagine ourselves as truly mixed blessings created by and for the multiethnic Christ:

*I have the right*

not to justify my existence

not to keep the races separate within me

not to be responsible for people’s discomfort with my physical ambiguity

not to justify my ethnic legitimacy

*I have the right*

to identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify

to identify myself differently than how my parents identify me

to identify myself differently than my brothers and sisters

to identify myself differently in different situations

*I have the right*

to create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial

to change my identity over my lifetime—and more than once

to have loyalties and identify with more than one group of people

to freely choose whom I befriend and love [[[27]](#endnote-27)]

1. . Nicholas Jones, Rachel Marks, Roberto Ramirez, and Merarys Ríos-Vargas, “2020 Census Illuminates Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Country,” United States Census Bureau, August 12, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark / Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 17, 28–29, 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, xxxv. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*, 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . Michelle A. Gonzalez, “Nuestra Humanidad: Toward A Latina Theological Anthropology.” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (February 2001), 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . Gonzalez, “Nuestra Humanidad,” 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . Chandra Crane, *Mixed Blessing: Embracing the Fullness of Your Multiethnic Identity* (Downers Grove: IVP Press, 2020), 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . Crane, *Mixed Blessing*, 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . For a helping study on “passing,” see Marcia Alesan Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. . Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 171; *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 165. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. . Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). See also “Imagination and Discourse in Action,” in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. . To be candid, I’m generally suspicious of the language of “Christian worldview” employed in mainly white American evangelical writings and contexts. This is partly due to the term’s overemphasis on systematized propositional statements that suggest that human beings are primarily “thinking” creatures who maintain coherent philosophical lenses for viewing reality via an idealist lens (an anthropology I find falls short in both theory and real-life experience), as well as proponents’ oppositional “us-vs.-them” posture which places Christianity (or at least their particular vision of it) in an antagonistic conflict with the so-called “secular” world rather than practicing a more hospitable open-handed posture. But my main issue is that the embracing of “worldview” in American evangelicalism has demonstrable roots in white supremacist ideologies which are ultimately antithetical to the ethos of the kingdom of God expressed in the person and teachings of Jesus Christ. On this, see Jacob Alan Cook, *Worldview Theory, Whiteness, and the Future of Evangelical Faith* (Lanham: Lexington Academic/Fortress Academic, 2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. . Ricoeur first describes “narrative identity” in *Time and Narrative, Volume 3* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), then unpacks it extensively in *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). See also *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), where narrative is more directly applied to Christian faith and theology. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. . Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007 [1981]). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. . For examples of the kind of narrative theology I’m advocating here, see N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (HarperOne, 2013), Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Baker Academic, 2014), Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), and George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion in a Postliberal Age* (Westminster John Knox, 1984). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. . A few examples: Michael Novelli, *Shaped by the Story: Discover the Art of Bible Storying* (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse, 2013), Rachel Blom, *Storify: Speaking to Teenagers in a Post-Christian World* (San Diego: The Youth Cartel, 2015), Amanda Hontz Drury, *Saying Is Believing: The Necessity of Testimony in Adolescent Spiritual Development* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015); Vincent A. Olea, *But I Don’t Speak Spanish: A Narrative Approach to Ministry with Young People* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2019); and Youth For Christ’s “3Story” approach to evangelism (<https://yfc.net/about/3story/>). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. . See Joel Mayward, “Theologia: Quaker Youth Ministry and Theopraxis in a Multicultural Context,” co-authored with Roger Nam, Leah Payne, Steve Sherwood, Hannah Souter, and Trisha Welstad, *Quaker Religious Thought* 135 (September 2020): 27–34. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. . See Kara Powell and Brad m. Griffin, *3 Big Questions that Change Every Teenager: Making the Most of Your Conversations and Connections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. . Crane, *Mixed Blessings*, 91. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. . Crane, *Mixed Blessings*, 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. . See Robyn Fivush, *Family Narratives the Development of an Autobiographical Self: Social and Cultural Perspectives on Autobiographical Memory* (London: Routledge, 2019), and Marshall Duke and Robyn Fivush, “Knowledge of family history as a clinically useful index of psychological well-being and prognosis: a brief report,” *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* Vol. 42, No. 2 (2008) [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. . Mark Yaconelli, *Between the Listen and the Telling: How Stories Can Save Us* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022), 51–52. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. . See Robyn Fivush, “The ‘Do You Know?’ 20 Questions About Family Stories,” *Psychology Today*, November 19, 2016, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-stories-our-lives/201611/the-do-you-know-20-questions-about-family-stories>. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. . Crane, *Mixed Blessings*, 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. . Maria P.P. Root, *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996), 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)