

Having learned only this week from the LA Times of the urgency of commenting on the Ethnic Studies Curriculum, I downloaded it all from the web and scanned through looking for key concepts in each of the topics and chapters.

My life choices and passions identify me: musician, seeker, curator of urban-wilderness interface, teacher of young musicians, composer, poet, conductor, flutist, Toastmaster, folk dancer, former Peace Corps Volunteer with the Orquesta Sinfonica Nacional de Bolivia and currently itinerant orchestra teacher for LAUSD.

These observations may be redundant to conversations already mined for insights and decisions among the committee members.

In no special order:

I looked for “**sundowning**” in the glossary. Working during a college summer in a gated community, Chautauqua, NY, I learned about sundowning from the Chef and Cook at the Star Cafeteria where I worked with them in the basement (as assistant to the salad chef, another white college student with salad-food prep chops!). They were African-American men, the chef much older and clearly wiser than the cook, who was a football coach during the school year. Both had to be outside the town gates by dark. By law.

There is a whole lot of additional history and insight about how in 1961, a white college student, perennially curious about race-relations as relevant to restrictions imposed by her family on who she might develop as friends...casual and close..from elementary school through junior and senior high school and into college...navigated the strange social geography from NY to NC. Active in main-stream (read “liberal”) protestant youth activities in school and college, **privilege** was perceived less from money (her parents were recovering via post WWII prosperity from the Great Depression) than from family expectations predating the Great Depression, than that everyone would attend college...as had everyone on the maternal side of the family. But though equally gifted in many ways, the paternal side had to develop crafts and arts that extended beyond the Great Depression but made adequate and honorable lives without college.

Many of our histories are at least that complex.

Do I have an ethnicity? Or does being white render me as invisible in this curriculum as black was invisible in recent books and courses?

Is it worth noting the travails and triumphs of the successive waves of immigrants from various parts of Europe and the Middle East? Is West Side Story still relevant? Do current immigrants share motivations and values with preceding groups. Are the groups monolithic within themselves? Are whites all alike?

Do my friends of subtle and not-so-subtle mixed unions have a story that merits consideration in Ethnic Studies? My friend and former student, Irish Catholic married a Jew and they have a gay son and a transgender daughter. Acceptance of gender fluidity varies in families: some supported by community (racial, national) traditional POVs and others by religious lens. An exasperated refrain uttered by my mother to explain why I mustn't date a black man (a particular man who causes me to smile as I type this) was, “Your child could never aspire to be President!” Not that having a child who would grow up to be President occurred to us during college dates in the 60s in Upstate New York...but now, we've had a President from a union that looked very much like our innocent couple. Same generation, off by only a few years.

There is a history of mixing and its not all about oppression. Or rape. Or privilege.

Oral history is a great way to collect stories. In the mid-80s' at a middle school in Pasadena, with no texts, I was assigned to teach the lowest English classes (with no training nor credential to do that, having only the SS Music K-14). That class included children from the immediate neighborhood, long established African-

American families, new arrivals from Armenia via hiding out, eating PB&J in a basement in Lebanon, and from Viet Nam via boats on which one boy had only cockroaches and other bugs to eat. So, with non-academic English mixed with intensely serious academic but rudimentary English, what to do? One of the best ideas in 55 years of teaching was to set each child to design an interview and contribute it to a “book” which we provided everyone at the end of the year, and placed a copy in the school library. Part of my own family came on the Mayflower, famously with no right to land except for the fact of making it across the Atlantic! Boat people. I wish I knew what each of them were thinking!

Noting in the Times article that some Jewish legislators have expressed concern that they might be excluded from discussion, reinforced my observation that “ethnic” might be better defined to mean studies about the experiences of people of color as lived today with foundation in the histories of colonization, not only of the North American continent, but also of South America, Africa and the Orient.

My aspiration for students enrolled in any course, is that they will develop an appetite and tools for exploring histories, being curious and open to the stories of groups and individuals. To seek rather than avoid people who are different from themselves, strengthening and developing their own identities that are inextricably linked to others in the community.

It is desperately important that we equip all students to be accomplices in raising up everyone. To enable the angels.

Ethnic Studies is a noble and timely topic. I do wonder how to rename it so that when some Americans are freshly excluded, they know why.

In harmony,

Ginny Atherton