

# “Category Is Not Destiny”

## The Multiracial Experience

Interview by SONYA WEAKLEY

America’s youth, lacking memories of racial segregation and the integration movement, offer unique perspectives on the concept of a multiracial society.

Indian American author **Chandra Prasad**, editor and contributor of *Mixed: An Anthology of Short Fiction on the Multiracial Experience*, says her urge to explain her mixed-race identity and get past superficial categorizations inspired her to create the book. Race still matters, but so do other factors, she says.

### What does it mean to be American?

To nurture and provide for family, community, nation and planet. To keep the lessons of history in your back pocket and refer to them frequently. To protect the young, impressionable and vulnerable. To make mistakes, get up, brush off your knees, wipe the sweat from your face and try again—harder this time. To see equal beauty in difference and commonality. To listen to people from other places with different perspectives. To have faith and proceed boldly. To create, refashion, imagine and invigorate. To hold dear the words democracy and freedom, and to hold just as dear every human life.

### When did you realize that race and ethnicity are factors in how people interact?

I can pinpoint the exact moment and it’s a rather silly one: elementary school, first grade, recess. I’m one of several earnest, excited girls discussing the fact that a fifth-grader from our school had gone to New York to audition for *Annie: the Broadway Musical*. The character Annie is a slight, freckled redhead who laments her “hard-knock life” in an orphanage. I loved Annie—both character and musical. Despite being black-haired and dark-skinned, I wanted desperately to be the next Annie and couldn’t

understand why my classmates seemed skeptical when I mentioned this. Later, my mother broke it to me: “A half-Indian Annie? Well...I’m not sure.”

### Can individuals successfully challenge ethnic labels or categories society imposes?

Race, ethnicity, and class are categories people use to make sense of differences. It’s a human tendency to categorize; the process helps make a complicated world a little simpler. Sometimes compartmentalizing is useful, but just as often



Courtesy Chandra Prasad

it’s misleading. All human beings have multifaceted identities that cannot be quantified simplistically. Time and again, in sports, politics, arts and on the world stage, determined individuals beat the odds, proving that category is not destiny.

To me, this is the most beautiful aspect of America: one’s destiny is not carved from either categorization or the circumstances one is born into. President Barack Obama’s inspiring, largely unpredicted rise to America’s highest office supports this. Our ancestors came to America because it is the land of opportunity, where anything is possible. This is still true.

Bracketing people based on appearance has led to isolation and reduced opportuni-

ties, and more devastatingly, holocausts and eugenics. If President Obama’s leadership has taught us nothing else, I think it shows that we must recognize difference, and acknowledge the context for it, but also realize our extensive common ground.

### Do you see signs of our society moving away from categorizing people by race?

My son, who was born in America, is Indian, Swedish, Italian, English and Russian. When he gets older, I have no idea how he will self-identify. I want him to know about his ancestors and the lives they had and the sacrifices they made. I want him to know that this country has transformed many times over. My husband and I want him to know history. But how my son looks ahead: that’s up to him.

As I write in the foreword to *Mixed: An Anthology of Short Fiction on the Multiracial Experience*, multiracial people can literally act as the solder between communities. They can straddle cultural expectations. Since multiracial teens resist classification, they have the capacity to view the world in a broad, open-minded way, to resist stereotypes and to show others that many boundaries are false.

America’s young people are already making a lot of positive change. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of online communities for mixed-race kids and teenagers. In high schools and colleges across the nation, diverse student groups are proliferating. There are all kinds of avenues for advocacy, outreach and networking across racial and ethnic lines. Most didn’t exist 20 years ago.

Yeah, race still matters. Of course it does. But so do many other variables and factors. I advocate—in all parts of life—more focus on the inside, less on the outside.