

Gerry: Hi everyone. Thank you for tuning into another episode of Writing Latinos. I'm really excited to talk today with Hector Tobar. Tobar is the award-winning author of six books, including *Our Migrant Souls*, *A Meditation on Race*, and *the Meanings and Myths of Latino*. That's the book we're gonna talk about in just a few minutes.

He's also written for the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and other publications, and is a professor of literary journalism and Chicano Latino studies at the University of California Irvine. Finally, he's the winner of prestigious awards, including a Pulitzer Prize and just last month, a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Many congratulations and thank you for joining me, Hector.

Hector: Thank you so much for having me.

Gerry: First, I would love for you to talk a little bit about the dedication of your book. Mm-hmm. You dedicated to, Latina historian named Vicki Ruiz, and, I know her well, of course, but I didn't realize that I, I mean, I could have guessed since you're at Irvine and she was at Irvine, that you guys would've had a connection. But could you tell me a little bit about what Vicki Ruiz has meant to you as a colleague, a mentor, any number of things.

Hector: Well, yeah. Vicki is the groundbreaking historian of Latina women's history and especially of Latina working women's history. And she's responsible for bringing me here to UC Irvine and for bringing me here as a tenured professor and for creating the conditions that allowed me to write this book, among other things. She's also a mentor to many, many historians, including my partner and wife, Virginia Espino, who got her PhD studying with Vicki and, and wrote her dissertation about the sterilization of women at Los Angeles County General Hospital, a dissertation that later became the movie *No Más Bebés*, which was released a few years ago to, to great success.

So Vicki has always been a supporter of mine, a believer in me. And I, I wanted to dedicate it to her and to her story, her the historians that she's mentored because they've done so, so much to transform my understanding of the contributions of Latinas to United States history.

Gerry: She is one of these figures that has loomed large over all of our careers in a lot of ways. Not only through the books that she's written, but just her generosity as a mentor and commentator

Hector: Absolutely.

Gerry: On conference panels and any number of things. So thank you. Thank you for explaining all that. Another thing you explain in your book is that James Baldwin is the literary father of our migrant souls, and I wanted to, I think that our listeners would kind of enjoy knowing what you meant by that.

Hector: Yeah. You know, I've been teaching classes here at UCI for six, seven years now, and I teach a course called "Writing Race," in which we talk about contemporary nonfiction, about race issues, and there's just so many great African-American, especially essayists, such as WEB Du Bois and James Baldwin. But I, I really felt kind of an absence of, of work by Latino writers that addresses the topic of what it means to be Latino within the race scheme of the United States. And so I set out to write that book and it varies, you know, very much, with James Baldwin and his incredible voice as a novelist and essayist, in, in my head, you know, that, that voice of someone who, has been hurt and, and is angered by the racisms he has seen, you know, James Baldwin, was shaped by the civil rights struggles that he witnessed in the 1950s and sixties, very close to Medgar Evers and Malcolm X and, and knew Martin Luther King, and, and saw all of them killed. And for me, you know, growing up in this state of California and teaching at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st to see the growth of the anti-immigrant movement and all the hatred directed at people, like my family and at people like my students and have to have my students, express this, the hurt and the sense of, of being insulted that they feel, at American media culture, especially in the way it portrays Latino people. So I just set out to write something, channeling the voice of James Baldwin in my head, knowing that I had to write something very specific to, to my experience and to the experience of Latino people.

And, you know, he, James Baldwin wrote *The Fire Next Time*, directed it to his nephew. I, I decided that I would direct my book, in, in, in this direct address that the book is written in, to my students and especially my, my Latino Chicano students.

Gerry: And you know, I, I had picked up on the connection of a letter to his nephew and you writing a letter to your students, but I, I, I had also picked up on your different emotional registers of writing.

There's, there, I feel like there's anger in your book, there's hurt in your book. there's also. Hope in your book, in the sense that it is kind of future oriented and maybe that's also the, the tie-in to your students. In some ways, I feel like the book begins and ends addressing Latino youth, so, could you talk about that a little bit? I mean, what, what is it about— why did writing to your students and offering them something that was also future oriented- Why did that make sense for you?

Hector: Well, you know, my students are intellectuals. I mean, they don't think of themselves that way. , they're 18, 19, 20, you know, 21, 22 years old.

But they've come here, to a university to become thinkers and to become professionals. And so you see them beginning their journey of intellectual inquiry and exploration. And so, you know, I just, to me, I just see the future in their writing. You know, they, they, they write stories for me, in assignments, in my nonfiction classes, in my, Latino Studies classes, in which I basically ask them, tell me a story about the Latino experience.

And those stories are invariably about survival and, and, and about, about being strong, right? About resilience. They're about resilience. they might describe a dysfunctional family. They might describe alcoholism. They might describe moments of precarity and humiliation, but they always end with the writer reaching the present.

And in the present, they're undergraduates at the University of California, one of the great universities of the world. And, and so you can't help but read those narratives again and again. And I've literally read hundreds, without being optimistic about the future. I mean, first of all, because people have such love for their community, you know, they have such love for their histories. They're curious about those histories. They want to unlock the mysteries in their pasts. And so to see that, there, that they, that they've been surrounded by that much love. All of that gives me a lot of hope for the future. And I'm just naturally an optimistic person because my parents were each divorced three times and kept on getting remarried. And you always had to have hope for a better future.

Gerry: Oh man. Where would we be without it? You have to. Yeah. No, totally. And you know, I'm gonna ask questions a little bit out of order because you were mentioning the kinds of things that your students write about. And I remember one of the things you say that all of your students have stories about is about their parents. And sometimes it's their parents crossing stories. Sometimes it's the story of their, their parents love affair, those kinds of things. And, and this is something that you write about in the book as well, your own story with your parents and their migration story and, the kind of, the, the kind of ways in which those stories of their parents migration and love affairs have also shaped them.

Hector: The specificity of the, of the Latino experience is that it is such a dramatic epic in the minds of the students. You know, I think that, African, African-American students grow up with young people, grow up with a sense of the epic nature, you know, of, of their histories.

One, that one that stretches back centuries. For a lot of Latino students, the drama is what happened the week before. You know? And, and they're living with this person who's undergone

an odyssey, you know, who's undergone their own, sort of like Iliad to get to the United States or to survive the Civil War in El Salvador.

And so I remember once a student standing up in my class, we were talking about, histories of migration and whatnot, and, and he, and he stood up and it was a class of about a hundred students and he said, you know, for. For us, a lot of us, you know, we feel small before the stories of our parents. It's like we could never live, do anything that lives up, you know, to the epic nature and the drama of what they did. You know?

Gerry: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Hector: And it, to tell you the truth, it's kind of frustrating. Mm-hmm. It's kind of frustrating to live that way and that that really struck me. So I think that that having lived through, you know, this recent migration, the arrival in a new community in the United States and, you know, it's sometimes even creating a barrio. You know, a lot of students are from New Barrios, you know? Corners of South Central where there weren't that many Latino people until their parents arrived or their grandparents arrived, or some other place in the United States. So I think that that really is something that's very distinctive and for me, just hearing all the specificity of it, you know, the constant, you know, invention and the surprises and the crazy turns that all the stories take. You know, a lot of them are really my favorites. Some of my favorites are written about one place, like one apartment. Where like three generations of people came through this one apartment and all these uncles and cousins and like 20 or 30 different people lived in this one apartment from one extended family at different times in history.

So yeah, it's just, it's that, that to me is absolutely irresistible as a writer.

Gerry: And I think I'm interested in this, is that I see all the time how the, the expectations of families and communities kind of shape how individual students see their experiences here on campus.

Because they do want to kind of, make good on all of the promises they have made to their families. And I think that that's exciting for them. But it comes with some. Degree of responsibility.

Hector: And it can be psychologically, heavy to deal with.

Gerry: Yes. Yes.

Hector: You know, to be the person who's going to redeem your family's story. You know, I, I became a writer, and it was only in my fourth book that I realized I learned from my father that his mother had been illiterate. And so, oh, well, maybe that's why I became a writer was that this man pushed me to be successful because he had this deep humiliation in his past that involved his, his illiterate mother, you know? So yeah, it can also be a, a, a burden.

Gerry: Did you learn that fact about illiteracy after you had already become a writer?

Hector: Oh, absolutely. I think I was on my fourth novel. I was writing columns on fourth book, and I, I was writing columns for the Los Angeles Times and I wrote a column about adult illiteracy in Los Angeles and this program that was educating older Latina and Latino men and women to read and write for the first time. And my father read this column and he came to my house and, and showed me a copy of my grandmother's passport that had an X where the signature should be and a bureaucrat had written "ignora firmar." You know? So all of that had happened long after I had had become a writer.

Gerry: That's amazing. And it, you know, to me it underscores one of the things that I think you write about a lot in the book, it might not be one of the themes that you identify in the beginning explicitly, but it's kind of a through line is and Latino history as a kind of intergenerational conversation and what connects one generation to another even if we don't know some of these histories until well after we're living them.

And so that's why I think it's interesting the fact that you didn't even learn this about your own family until you were four novels in. And I think you remem you said something even about like. The ways in which these old histories still live in our DNA, you know?

Hector: Yeah. Yeah. I think that, you know, I have for example, this fascination, with, uh, the Holocaust and with massacres.

So I know all about, the Armenian genocide and the Rwandan genocide and the Cambodian, you know, killing fields. And it's like, why, why do I have this fascination? And I, and I thought about it and, you know, my father just before I was born, few years before I was born, was living through all of these violent episodes in Guatemala and Latino history, especially the history of indigenous peoples is filled with all of these acts of, of violence. And we've suffered through these culturally eras in the written history, but. Perhaps our DNA has found ways to pass this longing, this sense that we're broken in some way and, and we want to sort of understand. And so I think that, and, and that's, you know... Latino identity: One of the things that helps define it is this sense of having a history, but it's also not knowing the history and having this mystery that's been hanging over you your whole life. You know, so many, I can't tell you how many times I've read a student who has told me, I know my father is holding something back. He's not telling me

about something or he won't talk about this, you know, and, and knowing that there's some trauma there. And then reaching an age where they can begin to ask questions and begin to sort of uncover what those things are, or begin to guess what they might be by talking to the, you know, brothers and sisters of their father and whatnot.

So, yeah, that's, I think those are, those are really common threads in, in the Latino experience.

Gerry: Yeah, that, that is fascinating. I, I think that's a hundred percent true. Another thing I wanted to ask you about is the books kind of central naming of the migrant experience is a really important part of the Latino experience overall. It's even in the title, *Our Migrant Souls*. And in some ways I felt like a lot of the book wasn't an address to migrants, an address to Americans, about what they should think about migrants and you working through your own thoughts about migration.

So, you know, I wanted to ask you, How and why you think the migrant experience is one that's really central to Latino identity? Latino history?

Hector: Well, I think that when you think about Latino as a de facto race term, now we all know it's supposed to be an ethnicity. Right. But in practice, people equate it with a race.

So there's, you know, Hispanic suspects are identified by the police as Hispanic. You know, Hispanic is counted in the census alongside white and black. And they have to do all these sort of subtraction to make it work. Right. And I think that, when you think about the way in which the perception of Latinos in the race scheme of the country is constructed, it's constructed by this notion that we come from somewhere else that's backward and uncivilized. And so I think, you know, from a negative perspective, from the perspective of the construction of race ideas, migration is central right to the idea of who we are as a people. And conversely, I think the way we construct our identity ourselves, our understanding of what it means to be Latino is by once again, you know, talking about, how, how our, how our, how our journeys are result of these imperial stories.

We don't call them those, but they are right? The story of Mexican underdevelopment, Mexican poverty is a story of, you know, of imperial exploitation of the construction of, you know, corporate power in Mexico and corporate agriculture, et cetera, et cetera. Governments in Central America that were overthrown.

And so we have these migration stories that are related to Empire and we all understand that. I mean, even, you know, if you're Cuban, you, there was a, a Cuban revolution that took place because the, you know, Cuban nationalist youth didn't, didn't want a stomach anymore, the sins of the Batista government at the service of US Imperial and corporate interests, right?

And so there was a revolution, and of course now there's the whole anti-communist movement, et cetera, et cetera. That's also a story of empire.

Gerry: Right.

Hector: So what links us as Latino people is that we have these stories of empire in our past and empire causing migration. And that, to me, so when, you know, when a Salvadorian man marries a Cuban woman, then they, they merge these two, you know, they have this emotional commonality in this story of migration and from that idea, the idea of Latino is born.

Gerry: Yeah. And your book, *Our Migrant Souls* will come into the world. At a moment when stories about migration and borders are very much in the news. And you have a chapter in your book called "Lies" that I found very powerful as a kind of rebuke of the ways in which migrants and immigration and borders are discussed. So it's clear to me that you are someone who wants to, I think many of us are trying to wrestle with how to do this, but to change Americans' minds about immigration and migrants and the immigrant experience. And so could you talk a little bit about how you would like to do that?

Hector: Well, I think first of all, we have to change the way in which we portray ourselves and the way we, in which we understand our experience. And so one of the lies about the migrant experience is that we've, we're just, you know, hapless victims of these systems. And it's just not true. You know, every migration story involves a headstrong person at its center.

Somebody who's like, this place is too small for me. I gotta go to "vamos 'pal norte" to reinvent ourselves. And so there's usually, some very interesting family drama. There's all of these different, you know, shades of family dysfunction and whatnot, right? In these stories. And they're really interesting for that. And, and yet in the portrayal, in the popular media, by both the left and the right, you have this incredible flattening of that story, right? Where either these barbarous cartel operatives, or these hapless immigrants, hapless peasants who don't understand, were confused.

And there's all these metaphors, you know, we live in the shadows. And all these things. And, and so that is really debilitating to us. Even the, even the liberal leftist image of the, of the immigrant as this, impoverished, exploited person, which has obviously has a grain of truth to it, it's just debilitating to us as a people because it becomes part of our self-image and the image that people have of us. And then of course, as the other, other part of this, uh, the other lie, is just the creation of the immigrant as this, you know, threat as the latest version of the Indians threatening the Cowboys as they cross the range, and that's basically what the immigrant has become in the popular imagination. And you will see this very often, of course, in cartel movies, which I had great fun deconstructing. And deconstructing the way that cartels take this common

aspect of everyday life in the United States, which is that you have a Latino neighbor, you, you work with a Latino guy, and it makes you believe, wait, maybe that guy could be, have a brother, or maybe he is working for a cartel, you know? Because that's part of what they do and that's what you see, right? And it just escalates from there. Because on the extreme right, there's all these incredible conspiracy theories about George Soros and others, encouraging these, these, sheep, these Latino sheep to come forward to transform the United States and transform our political balance, you know, by just flooding the United States with all of these, you know, Spanish speaking voters.

And I think it's really important, and what I like, what I'm doing in my book is deconstructing that. Where does that come from? What kind of insecurities produce this?

Gerry: Yes.

Hector: You know, and I, and I'm very proud of, of, of some of the, conclusions I reached about white insecurities and, and what really is feeding these white insecurities.

MIDROLL

[MUSIC - "City of Mirrors," by Dos Santos]

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Gerry: I was just gonna ask you to, to, to say a little bit more about that. What are the insecurities that feed into this perception?

Hector: Um, I think that your average American lives under an assault of data-driven capitalism, the insecurity of corporate America, the ruthlessness of corporate America, right? You go to work and you don't know if you're gonna be laid off or, you know, you, your credit score is being monitored and because your credit score is low, you can't get a home loan or you can't even rent a house or something.

And so, I think that, that what the right has done is they've taken these insecurities and they've, they've transposed them onto Latino people. So in the Cartel movie for example, that really ruthless cartel operative is really a capitalist. He's a hyper capitalist. So these dramas are written hardly ever by Latino writers, usually by white writers. And the white writers essentially taking

the really ruthless corporate boss, and they're making him into a cartel boss, you know, cartel operative. So the cartels really are stand-ins for the corporations.

Gerry: I mean, one of the things that I, I really loved, and it's still related to this question of how. We should reframe conversations about migration and, and understand migrant lives in new ways is: I love how, you know, part of what you're writing demands of us is, a kind of recognition of all of our complicity in this same system. And part of how you do that is by kind of bringing us into the really intimate worlds of migrants and some of these... I mean, to the extent that you can, you know, but as a, as a writer, but some very powerful images to me were, when you talk about how all a migrant really wants is to be able to buy a La-Z-Boy chair and a back support to rest and read and maybe fill their homes with special objects like, uh, Diego Rivera reprint or something like that.

Hector: Or that Frida reprint.

Gerry: Yea, that Frida reprint.

Hector: Exactly.

Gerry: And, and all listeners, you know, you're in for a treat to read the read the Frida chapter as well. And then there was also this really amazing moment, I think in part because my grandma, my Mexican-American grandma in Tucson would also take me to the homes of the people whose houses she cleaned. Where you talk about going to your, I think to your aunt's jobs where she was a housekeeper. And you have a whole scene about how at the end of the day when the family who's, who she cleans, kind of drops her off at the bus station, or if not her then, housekeepers like her, they just imagine that she's going off to some grimy, dangerous right barrio that they don't even, really think about.

And to me that was just such an amazing way of demonstrating the kind of disconnect between. And what you want instead of that disconnect is to kind of bring us into encounters with one another.

Hector: I think that that part of, too, of what what you're saying is that I think part of the, one, part of the migrant experience that we don't tell of, of who is a Latino person in the United States, we don't really show the interclass journey. Right? We don't show the bus ride that the, that the woman takes from Bel Air to East LA, right? Every day. I mean, the, the bus line, the number two bus line on Sunset Boulevard. Yeah. It's filled with Latino women headed west and east, back and forth, because it, it's really, it, it goes to the heart of the inequality, of the United States and how the comfort of the United States is built on the labor of Latino people. And it's

just so much easier just to erase that and to pretend it doesn't exist and or to make it something really quaint and trivial. You know?

So we have Lupe, we had Lupe Onteveros playing and made 500 times right? right? On tele, you know, in, in film and television, and never really exploring, exploring her character very, very much in depth in all those different roles, right? She was just a backdrop to this story of, you know, white drama and white, you know, sadness or whatever, or comedy that she would, all the different roles that she would do.

And so, yeah, I just think we don't, we don't explore interconnectedness. And I think one of the lines I'm most fam, I'm most I'm most proud of in my book is that we really are all characters in the same story. We're not, you know, all of us are, all of us are in the same stage called the United States of America and you really can't understand, the whole, the plot of the movie, unless you see the lives of all these people together in one stage.

Gerry: Yes. And let's stick for a minute on the subject of comfort and discomfort. But this time I'd, I'd like to ask about the discomfort many Latinos feel in talking about race in particular, you know. Your chapter on race is fascinating. And this is a topic I think that many Latinos are wrestling with right now. I've seen so many assertions over the past few months that we need to be having this very difficult conversation within our own communities about anti-blackness, about anti-indigeneity, about our own identities, and I'm wondering why is this conversation so difficult and uncomfortable for Latinos to have?

Hector: Well, because our own history is filled with erasures. You know, and I, I see this every time I go back to Guatemala and I get to know some of my older relatives a bit better and to have more serious discussions. You know, I've really learned in the last, just in the last 10 years or so, how much indigeneity, how easily it's erased in a Guatemala family's story.

I have, an uncle who looks, you know, deeply indigenous. it turns out he's the product of a marriage between, a woman who is herself pretty indigenous and a man who wasn't. And, and so in his life, he, his professional life. Has been successful. He works in, he's a, he worked in banks, he's now retire, (ee was bank teller), because he was able to erase his indigeneity. And he's totally aware of that. He says, look, Hector, in the village where I grew up, you, you know, people would move to the, to the town, the nearest town, and when they moved, they would change their last names. So if they had a Mayan last name, they would become, you know, instead of Shuk or whatever, you know, they would become Garcia or Ramirez.

And so there's been this process of this erasure of our indigeneity and has a lot to do with patriarchy, has a lot to do with ideas of legitimacy and illegitimacy has a lot to do with class, you know, and so that, you know, up until recently it was considered a source of great shame in a

mix, you know, and almost every family is mixed, you know, that you had an indigenous past. and I talk...Gloria Arianes, who was a Brown Beret discovering that she was really very much Tongva, she was a Tongva Indian. Now she's an elder in the Tongva tribe, and how that history had been erased from her. So there's been this incredible erasure of, of our indigeneity. Also, I, I, you know, and I, I, I indigene itself, any indigenous identities itself, itself's kind of a story, an ongoing story. It's very flexible, the way, you know, you can describe your, your own indigeneity. And then of course there's a huge elephant in the room, which is whiteness.

And so there is this, we were supposed to be the next white people, right? Because like the Italians and the Greeks and the Jews...they all sort of assimilated into whiteness some more successfully than others. Right. We were supposed to be that, those people. Who would... and a lot of our relatives, a lot of our older relatives, they lived that way. You know, they dye the hair blonde or they, you know, they try to lose their accents and they take classes to lose their accents and whatnot.

And, and yeah, that is definitely, I say that the, that our relationship to whiteness is both the tragedy and the comedy of us. Because it's sort of ridiculous, some of the things that, you know, our people do, you know, to feel or think themselves white. You know, and of course, white is this incredibly absurd, term, that, you know, is invented in American history to... justify slavery essentially.

So, you know, all of this is, it's a, it's a lot to unpack and I think that, , you know, the, the, the patient exploration of both United State History and your own genealogy, your own dramas, your own telenovelas.

Gerry: Absolutely. I, you know, I, something I get asked all the time, and something I'm sure you're asked all the time is, are Latinos just becoming the next Italians, Germans, Irish. What's your answer to that?

Hector: I think we would be becoming that were it not for immigration and were it not for the wall and were it not for the construction of the idea that Latino people are a danger to the race order of the United States. Cuz that's, that's what's happened in our lifetimes, right? And so, instead, Latino is becoming like a kind of caste.

And of course not everybody is a member of that caste. Right. Carlos Slim when he visits. He's not a member of that, of that cast. Right. , but, , but a lot of us, a lot of us feel the weight of caste. And, and I think that, that the presence of that class cast, , equation and the image of us being, that is what keeps us from becoming the next white people.

Gerry: I think the other thing I resist about that question is that it's tied to an older understanding Absolutely. Of assimilation that said that to assimilate meant to become white in the late 19th and early 20th century. And I think, Latinos by and large probably are assimilating today, but I don't think that assimilating to the United States of the 21st century necessarily means assimilating as white. You know? I think we live in a much different country today than we did a hundred years ago.

Hector: Well, there's all different, well, you know, it's, I have lots of students who've grown up alongside Black people or in mixed Black Latino families. And the pull of African American culture is also really strong. Because it has this incredible, inventiveness that people identify with and this resilience that people identify with. And so, you know, I, I, I, I see that. I think that, you know, there's just, there's lots of stuff going on, I think, and in the end, I think the thing that we don't really talk a lot about is class, which is a big part of what Latino identity is about these days.

Gerry: I guess that relates to the next thing I wanted to ask too, which isn't about it. It, it's kind of about this idea of fitting in. And, you know, you have, almost a, a directive towards the end of the book about how we should do more. We should want more than to just fit in. And I think that, you know, the pressure that Latinos feel to fit in is part of how you explain, you know, the more conservative Latinos among us. You know, the, that it's a desire to fit in and I feel like, you know, writing about the experiences and beliefs of conservative Latinos is something I've given a lot of thought to over the past 10 years, in part because of my relationship with my grandfather, who was a very conservative Colombian Panameño, who served in the military.

And, you know, I never thought of how his aims as a human being was to fit into the United States. You know, he would talk about, he would talk with great pride about like having earned \$250,000 over the course of a 20 year career in the military dishwasher. You know, if you calculate that out by the year, it's really not that much. But the idea that he had earned a quarter of a million dollars in his lifetime was an immense source of pride for him. And, you know, he talked about putting a, a roof over his family's head, sending his kids to school. Those, those things. But I had never thought of it in terms of just fitting in.

And so I don't know if you could talk a little bit more about the, the pressure that Latinos to fit in and what fitting in means.

Hector: Yeah. I think that primarily it means embracing American individualism. Right? Embracing this notion that we should define ourselves by the standard, you know, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant measures of success that, you know, became the dominant culture of this country up until recently.

You know, that we should, uh, value material wealth as a, as a measure of our goodness, and a measure of how God has looked upon us as. as, as good people. Uh, and so, uh, you know, should we fit in and assimilate into, into the consumer, the consumer model of living. Right? Where you, you find, glory and happiness because you buy a Tesla or you know, and you feel good about yourself because you buy a Tesla... Also, it's a, it's a luxury object. And you know, and so should we aspire to that?

Should we aspire to, to become just as worthy of that prize as anybody else? And I understand the pull of that. Yeah. But to me, it's empty. It's an empty thing. It's also mathematically impossible for all of us to succeed, because there are limited resources in the planet and because of the way capitalism is structured, there, there, there, there are haves and have nots.

And that's what whiteness is. First of all, no human being is white.

White is this abstract category, right? and, and white is not a color. White is a state of mind. So to, to, to say I am white and, you know, is, is to say, I no longer suffer the hardships of my Italian predecessors, my Irish predecessors, or even my rural impoverished Oregonian, you know, ancestors or whatever. So white is this state of mind in which you, nothing matters except how hard you work and everybody is equal.

And so I don't, I, I think entering into that, I mean, entering into that state of mind means forge by definition means forgetting about your past, forgetting about history. Right? about the people who were responsible for bringing you to, to where you are. Right?

And I, I just, I find that's something that I don't want to aspire to, and I don't think, I don't think also it's viable anymore. I just don't think it's a good way to live. Yeah, and I think that, and I, and I say this as someone who in a certain sense is a success according to those, you know, parameters. Right? I sent my three kids to college. I've paid half a million dollars in university and private school tuitions. All my book advances have gone, to my kids' education. I've led a good life according to that, to those measures, but I look forward to a future when we don't think of those as the only measures of a, of a well-led life.

Gerry: Yea. Yeah, no, it's heavy man. And going back to the, the, you know, lives our parents wished for us and how we try to meet that. I mean, would you say, are you, is your life today kind of the fulfillment of what your parents would have wanted for you?

Hector: I went to college. , I'm a respected professional, but more than anything I'm a thinker. So I have redeemed my, my, my Guatemalan parents who, you know, my mother did graduate from high school, but my father, you know, only got as far as I think this. Fourth or fifth grade in Guatemala and came to night school in the United States.

And I've redeemed them. You know, I've, I've made them feel like "gente de razón." That's, that was the term the, the Spanish would use to... people who were not Barbaras Indians. They were, you know, these racist ideas. And so that, you know, working, work their ways into, into our minds, into our heads, and we feel, we feel broken. We feel tainted. We feel doomed. And, and part of what, every parent hopes for their kid, every migrant hopes for their kid, is that they escape, you know, the precarity, they escape the insults of poverty and all of that. So in that measure, yes. And, for me, the, the wonderful thing is that I've managed to do that and now I am turning it, I am turning that against itself or attempting to, you know?

Gerry: Yes, yes.

Hector: Especially with the last, the last passages of the, of my book.

Gerry: Yes. Oh, that speaks I'm sure to, to so many of us. So, you know, one thing you had starting to talk about, talk about was your Guatemalan parents. And that leads me to the last question, you know, among all of the things that our migrant souls is, it is a memoir.

So I'm wondering if you could tell listeners a little bit more about your personal journey and specifically how your thoughts about latinidad have evolved through conversations with your family, through conversations with your students and through your travels across the country. Because another important part of the book and say the last third or so is your, drive to, to the Pacific Northwest and to Idaho, and to the South and to New York.

So, you know, how has learning about those other Latino experiences intersected with your own sense of latinidad, based on your life and, you know, maybe even reshape some of your thoughts about what it means to be Latino?

Hector: Right. Yeah. I, I, I think that one of the wonderful things about being a writer as opposed to being a ballerina is that you get better at it as you get older.

Because you can bring sort of the wisdom that you acquire about life, the insights that you acquire, you know, not just from studying and reading, but also just from being a father and being a worker, you know, being an employee. All those things teach you about, about life. And, and, and, and as you get older too, you can understand more of the motivations of the people around you.

So you asked about my family and I've really come to understand my mother and father so much better, now that I've been a parent myself for more than 20 years and, and that I've, you know, and, and seeing them enter their, you know, their sunset years and seeing them reflect on their

own lives... I, I've under, and that's part of what the book is about too. It's coming to a realization about my father, especially in the traumas that he suffered as a child and how that shaped, his vision of himself and how really he never stopped being that poor kid who was abused by his stepmother and grew up in this town, a very, very poor town of Gualan in, in Guatemala.

As you sort of acquire this wisdom and this insight about yourself, it, it also shapes the way you see the world around you. And so traveling across the United States, I meet people like my mother and father all the time. And essentially those are those char, that type of person appears in my books all the time.

I, my books are filled with working class Latino intellectuals. You know what? The construction work. In fact, in fact, there's a construction worker in the book from Atlanta, who's undocumented. He's in his fifties. Reads like crazy reads, the Mexican political press reads poetry, you know, as a philosopher, I meet people like that all the time.

I stumbled in, I was walking through Spanish Harlem and I met this guy who was, like, you know, he had also been, he had worked for I think the sanitation department or something. no, he worked for the utilities in New York City. But he was a philosopher and he's, he was describing the community history in this one that had taken place in this one block in just great detail.

And so realizing that that's sort of just part of who we are. And that we, you know, is, is just been one of the great journeys of, of my life. And to be able to share it with the readers as I drive across the United States and see all these different places, you know, was just, a wonderful thing. And, and realizing we have these commonalities, you know, just, I go to speak to this Mexican construction worker in Atlanta who's telling me he hasn't seen his family in 20 years because he's undocumented and he can't cross. And then a few days later I was in Miami and I'm seeking with these Cuban men and women who were separated from their relatives for 20 years, right? And so it's this, seeing these kind of commonalities is, has been really one of the great gifts of, of working on this book and of my career as a, as a writer.

Gerry: Thank you so much for your time, Hector. Hector Tobar is the author of *Our Migrant Souls, A Meditation on Race and the Meanings and Myths of Latino*. And I promise you, you're gonna wanna go out and get it and read it because it's really, , thoughtful and thought-provoking. So thank you so much for taking the time to join us, Hector.

Hector: Thank you so much for having me and for your thoughtful questions.

[MUSIC- "City of Mirrors," *Dos Santos*]

CREDITS

Thank you for listening to this episode of Writing Latinos—

We'd love to hear your suggestions for new books that we should be reading and talking about.

Drop us a line at gerald@publicbooks.org

This episode is brought to you by Public Books. It was produced and edited by Tasha Sandoval.

Our music is “City of Mirrors” by the Chicago-based band, Dos Santos.

I'm Geraldo Cadava. We'll see you again next time.