October 6, 2016 | By Nancy Murphy

The 2016 election offers an opportunity to stimulate new conversations about race in America, Stanford expert says.

This is an installment of **Wide Angle: Election 2016,** a Stanford media series that offers scholarly, non-partisan perspectives on the forces shaping the election.

An interview with Stanford english professor, Paula Moya

What roles are race and ethnicity playing in the 2016 election—and what might that mean for America's future? Stanford English Professor Paula Moya provides a unique perspective on how language, schemas, narratives, and literature shape our beliefs about race.

Race and ethnicity in America have emerged as high-profile issues in the 2016 election. To understand the role that race is playing in this election—and across the nation more broadly—Worldview Stanford interviewed Paula Moya, a professor of English and the director of research at the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University. Moya's Stanford affiliations also include Iberian and Latin American cultures, modern thought and literature, and feminist, gender, and sexuality studies.

What role is race is playing in the 2016 election and how is that different than in the past?

I think race is playing a huge role in this election, much more than any other election that I've seen.
I've been working on race and ethnicity for a long time now, and how willing people are to believe that we should study race and ethnicity has changed quite a bit. I remember in 2008, leading up to that election, there was an undercurrent that, "We're about to elect a black president. Let's not talk about race," or "We're past that." Nobody is saying we're past race now.

Race has been a part of U.S. history since the very beginning. What's interesting is that following the Civil Rights Movement, conversations about race went underground. We saw a lot of coded language like Richard Nixon's Southern strategy, which signaled his stance toward race without actually using the words black, or African-American, or Negro, or colored. To even talk about race began to be seen as racist, and to be racist was bad. Nobody wants to be seen as a bad person. Nobody wants to see themselves as a bad person.

Americans, in general, still have a very hard time talking about race. I think it's partly because everybody feels implicated in some way. Some parts of our society are very angry about what they and their families, their parents, their grandparents have experienced, and want to lash out at others for not attending to their situation and their pain. On the other hand, there are people who are thinking, "Hey, I didn't do this," and are perhaps feeling a little threatened by the demographic changes happening in this country, especially when combined with other threats like terrorism, climate change, and slow economic growth.

People want to know that their children are going to be better off than they are. That's part of the American narrative. And they may be looking for someone to blame.

Can we have a meaningful conversation about race in America at this moment in time? What would that look like?

I think that having a meaningful conversation about race is about helping people understand that race is not a thing that we have or that we are. It's not located in our DNA; it's a social process. It's a way of interacting with others. Once you understand that part of what race is, is doing, a way of being with others, then you can start to think about how we can be different with other people. Part of understanding that race is a social process is understanding how fundamental perception is to that process. It's coming into contact with another person and perceiving them in a particular way, and then behaving with them in a particular way.

All of perception is conditioned by learned ways of being in the world. It's conditioned by your culture; it's conditioned by what you've learned in school; it's conditioned by what you've read, which is where I think literature is so important because if people were to read more things by people who are different from them, they might understand that there are other ways of perceiving the world. I think that allowing people to understand more about race as a doing, as a way of perceiving, is crucial to having a good conversation about race.

I am hopeful. I think that it is crucial that we actually are able to bring these issues out in the open. That is what gives me hope about what's happening in this presidential election. For better or worse, these ideas, these issues, these matters are not hidden anymore. They're not operating below the radar. They're right out there. When the ideas are right out there, then that makes it available for me to say, Let's look at this. Let's talk about this. What is being implied? How does this actually work? How true is this? I know that the politics of truth are at issue in this conversation, but we can have that conversation. We can talk about why it is that you perceive this situation in the way that you do, and why it is that I perceive it so differently. Once we start having that conversation, then we can really ask ourselves if we're living together the way that we want to.

As an English professor, you must pay a lot of attention to language. How is language shaping this election in distinctive ways?

When we hear some of the rhetoric and slogans being used in this election, those of us who are minorities think about our parents who were punished for speaking Spanish, or our grandparents who were not able to get an education or a mortgage, or about the African-Americans who really suffered violence because they dared to speak to somebody or look at somebody. That is not an America that I want to live in.

The truth is that a multicultural America is an interesting America. It has better food for one thing. It has better music. It has better art. Since the Civil Rights Movement, people get that. It's not only minorities who don't want to go backward. A lot of people want to go forward and figure out how we can all learn to respect each other enough to have a more egalitarian society than we have had in the past. And we haven't had an egalitarian society in the past.

It's like the situation with the Olympic swimmer Simone Manuel. One of the advantages of her winning that gold medal is that suddenly a little known aspect of American history was revealed—that African-Americans were systematically denied access to public pools. How do you learn to swim when you're denied access to a pool? Well, you don't. Those aspects of our history are something that non-African-Americans or people who haven't suffered that kind of segregation didn't know about. Once they do, at least the young people, they tend to be shocked.

America's future is about making it possible for all members of our nation to share more equally in the wonderful resources that we have at our disposal.

There are a few different narratives being used in this election, including fear and hope. What broader narratives are influencing this election? Is there an overarching American narrative at work as well?

We are in a situation right now where there are a lot of cleavages in the nation. We need to find ways to come together if we are to move forward, and we're fortunate in that we do have some very powerful narratives in the United States that we can draw upon to do this. A fundamental one is e pluribus unum: out of many, one. Another that we can draw upon is "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal." Of course we'll edit that so it's "all people..." Whether or not we're able to achieve full and perfect equality, having that as an ideal is a very important way for us to go forward. It is a fundamental American value. I think once we give up that idea, then we have given up what it means to be American.

You write a lot about schemas—the different ways that we perceive the world. How do our schemas shape our beliefs about race and our behavior? And what role can literature play?

Different people have different schemas for perceiving the same object or situation. I've found it very interesting to talk to people who are very different from me, to really understand that my perception is not necessarily the "right one" and neither is theirs.

One of the things I find valuable about literature is that it gives us insight into other people's minds. I can talk to somebody, read their body language, imagine and project, but I don't actually know what they are thinking. With literature, an author constructs a narrative in which he or she creates characters that can take us into somebody else's mind. We can learn about the world that we live in by visiting it through other people.

By challenging the schemas that you bring to reading, a really good work of literature can cause you to stretch or alter your schemas. That's what reading a lot of literature written by

people who are not me has done. I might be a minority, but I am not an African-American woman living in Ohio in mid-century America, like the character in Toni Morrison's novel, Sula. How do I have any sense of what that's like unless somebody, an artist of the caliber of Toni Morrison, writes a book that allows me to spend some time visiting that?

Of course, the mistake is to imagine that reading one work of literature gives you access to the truth. That's not the issue. It gives you access to another way of being human, to another way of thinking about what it means to be human. Then you can replicate that time and time again with other people. That's why I read John Updike. Talk about somebody who's far away from my experience!

You find out that there are a lot of commonalities about what it means to be human, but you also see a lot of the differences. When you situate the differences within their own historical context, then that allows you to understand a bit more about why we end up in the struggles and fights that we have with each other.

If you were asked to recommend a book to the next president of the U.S., what would it be, and why?

One book that I have found to be incredibly powerful, readable, and scholarly is Mae Ngai's Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America. It traces the history of immigration policy and enforcement. A lot of Americans don't understand the degree to which immigration policy – not just slavery and the Civil War—shaped our racial world. I would give that book to the next president to help him or her really understand the world that we live in, this nation that we share.

Another book that I find very, very powerful is Toni Morrison's A Mercy. It is set at a time before race existed in the way that it does now, a time when race was still coming into being. She makes us see a very different world—a world before race. Perhaps that also allows us to see a time after race. ☀

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