WE HAVE PASSED A MILESTONE

An Interview with Eric J. Sundquist
by Agnieszka Graff

Eric J. Sundquist is the UCLA Foundation Professor of Literature. Before teaching at UCLA, he was a member of the faculties at UC Berkeley, Vanderbilt University, and Northwestern University. He received his B.A. from the University of Kansas (1974) and his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University (1978). A scholar of American literature and culture with an interest in the problematics of race and ethnicity, he is the author or editor of eight books including, most recently, King’s Dream: The Legacy of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” Speech (2009) and Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America (2005). His Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature (1993) was the winner several prestigious prizes, including the MLA James Russell Lowell Prize for best book published during the year. His earlier works include Home as Found: Authority and Genealogy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature (1978), Faulkner: The House Divided (1983), The Hammers of Creation: Folk Culture in Modern African-American Fiction (1992). He has also co-authored Volume 2 of the Cambridge History of American Literature (1995), as well as essay collections or anthologies on American Realism, Frederick Douglass, Mark Twain, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Ralph Ellison. From 1991 through 1997 he was general editor of the Cambridge University Press book series Studies in American Literature and Culture, and he has served on the Executive Council of the Modern Language Association and the National Council of the American Studies Association.

Agnieszka Graff interviewed Prof. Sundquist in Warsaw on May 7, 2009.

Agnieszka Graff: How did you get interested in the question of race in American literature? What is the genesis of your book Wake the Nations? It is a vast study of the way race “works” in a number of classic texts. Reading it was a revelation to me. Especially the chapter on Melville’s Benito Cereno, and the one reading Mark Twain side by side with the Plessy decision. Clearly, many years of thinking and reading went into it. How did it begin?
Eric J. Sundquist: In my graduate study, my dissertation, which became my first book, I worked on classic American figures: Cooper, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Melville. I had in mind a project subsequent to that which would deal again with a variety of classical figures, but moving on into the 20th century. My interest was not race at the time. I was specifically interested in the question of suspense—both as a formal property of texts, and also as a theme. So I became interested in those works in which there was some kind of unknown or secret at play, like Melville’s Benito Cereno, Twain’s Pudd’nhead Wilson or in the case of Faulkner, Light in August.

AG: But those are all texts about race...

ES: Yes, they are texts about race. But it wasn’t evident to me that my interest in them was coalescing around the idea of race until I looked at the set that had been most drawn together in my imagination. And I realized that race was another element they had in common.

AG: And that race really is a key source of suspense in American culture?

ES: Yes. As I got more interested, I decided to write a book about Faulkner alone, because I felt I really needed to understand him in his historical context. Although people had certainly talked about race in Faulkner, I was struck by the degree to which their approach was a-historical, that is without consideration of what reservoir of Southern history and Southern thinking about race relations, and about racial mixing in particular, Faulkner would have been drawing on. So I ended up writing a book about Faulkner that made me rethink what I had believed I knew about American literature in general. This drew me back into the 19th century.

AG: And your reading of race in Faulkner...?

ES: It is not that I was inclined to think that he was finally a racist, but that he dealt with inherited feelings and attitudes which he knew were part of the social fabric of the South, and belonged to him as well as everybody around him. What sets him apart is that he represents an astounding degree of self-consciousness about the function and implications of racism.

AG: This intellectual trajectory—from suspense in American literature, to Faulkner, to race in late 19th century literature, and more recently to
ethnicity and Jewish studies—has recently led you outside literature, into political discourse. You are about to publish a book on King’s “dream” speech, and in your seminar at the ASC you are going to look at the rhetorical strategies of Barack Obama, the way he has dealt with race in his campaign. Are you trying to locate his speeches in the African American tradition of public speaking?

**ES:** Yes, that is what I do in my lecture. But my interest is less in race than in the way Obama has studiously *bracketed* the question of race. He really did as much as he could during the campaign to make it a non-issue. As a politician he is not just very intelligent, but also very adept. He had the advantage, which I believe he recognized and exploited, of coming of age politically when he could appear not to have been the beneficiary of affirmative action. This would have been more difficult for a black candidate of the previous generation. He also realized the benefit of his cosmopolitan lineage. He could and did present himself—not just hypothetically, but literally—as a citizen of the world, and thus stand somewhat outside of the trajectory of African American life, and the liabilities that would be associated with that. It seems to me that in his very person he was given a set of opportunities and advantages that have worked magnificently for him politically. But at the same time those same things have guaranteed that he would be seen critically by those who might want him to speak more forthrightly about his mixed race or to identify more strongly as black.

**AG:** It seemed to me a “can’t get it right” scenario. NPR held a number of several discussions of race in the elections and the accusations of listeners calling in varied from “not black enough to be authentic” to “why can’t we just ignore race” to “why won’t he claim a ‘mixed race’ identity”. He will always appear too much or not enough of a “race man,” depending on who is looking.

**ES:** That’s right. There is no way to please everyone.

**AG:** The Polish media had a way of downplaying the importance of race in the U.S. elections. There was a desire to see Obama’s candidacy and later his election as a sort of happy ending—evidence that America has entered a “post-racial” era. My impression was that these elections did not erase the issue from public debate, but rather brought it into a new level of complexity and nuance. Difficult and not so obvious things are finally being said.
about race relations. I thought the so called “Race speech”—the one he gave in Philadelphia after the Reverend Wright trouble—was a key moment. Have you analyzed this speech? Do you see it as significant?

ES: It is not the centerpiece of my interest in Obama, because in part it is a speech he would prefer not to have given. Having been forced to do so, however, he did brilliantly. It is one of his most powerful speeches.

☐ AG: The Philadelphia speech was primarily meant for white audiences. But what about black audiences?

ES: If you examine his speeches for black audiences, you will find that from the very beginning he looks for a way to position himself just right when he addresses the issue of his racial inheritance. He is very cautious to respect the older generation of which he is not a part, to pay tribute to those who laid the ground for his candidacy, while at the same time distancing himself from them. He positions himself as part of the Joshua generation.

☐ AG: Are you saying he was a different Obama, when he spoke to black people?

ES: His appearances before specifically black audiences are visibly different from those he made before general audiences, different in ways that I would call instrumental. Speaking to the NAACP he would link Roy Wilkins to Martin Luther King. Speaking to the Urban League he would pay tribute to the leadership of Whitney Young and ally him to Martin Luther King. Speaking at the Selma voting rights commemoration he would call on the courage of John Lewis and ally him with Martin Luther King. In speaking to these organizations he was doing more than just paying tribute. It was as though he was trying to convince them—and they really did need convincing—that he was truly their inheritor, that he could truly take up the cause for which they had not just fought, but made many personal sacrifices.

☐ AG: You are saying that he couldn’t take black support for granted, and knew it? That’s what many people assumed—that African American’s would vote for him no matter what.

ES: Not at all. I don’t think the story has yet been fully told about the degree of skepticism that the older activists of the civil rights movement had about
Obama. Many of them were doubtful about his candidacy. Not because they didn’t finally want it to come about, but either for political reasons, because they were beholden to another candidate, specifically Hillary Clinton, or because they thought Obama was inexperienced, an upstart. Some also thought he was inauthentic: merely waving the banner of racial inheritance, without really having suffered any disadvantage. They worried he wouldn’t represent them, wouldn’t be able to make his case as an African American candidate.

**AG:** On the other hand, overdoing it was also dangerous because of the white voters who might be listening…

**ES:** One might say that the burden of his campaign was to convince the American people that despite the fact that he was a black man, he could speak for all Americans. That’s relatively obvious. But it was no less true that when speaking to black audiences he had to convince them—without addressing the fact in crude terms, or in pandering terms—that he would be a black man as well. This goes back to the question of how he negotiates the racial line in his life and in his politics. His predicament is that he cannot automatically count on identification with either group. My point is that black support was by no means automatic—he had to win it, and that’s what he does in those speeches.

**AG:** There is this, and then there is the consistent effort in the main current of his campaign to downplay race. Would you attribute it to him personally or to his strategic advisors? There was an article in the *The Atlantic* by Marc Ambinder early in 2009 called “Race-Over”, based on interviews with people from the campaign. Apparently, there was a whole team of people strategizing how not to allow race to become an issue. The aim, they said, was to make Obama racially transparent: a presidential candidate who happens to be black, rather than a black man running for presidency…

**ES:** In a sense it doesn’t matter if it was Obama’s own strategy or that of his advisors. Obviously, he chose advisors with whose advice he was comfortable. It doesn’t change much, given what we know about Obama as a politician, if we assume it was entirely his own self-construct, or if it was partly engineered by campaign advisors. The two things seem to me close enough together.

**AG:** But then there is his autobiography—a personal statement, no advisors involved there. And *Dreams from My Father* do not downplay race. It ends
up in Africa, an affirmation of rootedness, truth of the self... Don’t you think that is a book he would prefer not to have written?

**ES:** I don’t know that that rootedness in Africa is necessarily in conflict with being an American. Nor is it necessarily about race. We wouldn’t say that someone who engaged in a search for his roots and ended up in some Asian or European country was privileging race, would we? I don’t think in Obama’s case that is really true. It is true that he may have preferred not to have book in his background—not because he would see it as a contradiction, but because he would imagine it could be used against him somehow. He has made a very decided effort—particularly in his inaugural address, but also in other speeches—to put on the same plane the experience of immigrants to the United States and that of descendants of slaves. This explains a good deal about his political philosophy. It also allows us to read the ending of *Dreams from My Father* not as a celebration of racial roots, but a recognition of ‘coming home’—a place where your name is recognized and so on.

☐ **AG:** And a celebration of the fact that Americans come from all over the world, including Africa?

**ES:** Yes. If he were to deny that Africa is where his name is recognized, where a significant part of his lineage comes from, that evasion certainly would make him a more controversial or even antagonistic figure. He has the advantage that his African roots are not the roots of slavery. It really matters that his African roots are those of the son of immigrants. This may be a problem to some black people who would want him to speak more forthrightly from within the African American experience.

☐ **AG:** Colin Powell is a similar case, of course.

**ES:** Yes, it’s an obvious but useful comparison. Not simply because he is of mixed race, but because his heritage is different, because he is the son of an African, he straddles the line that Colin Powell also straddles. You may call it a sort of privilege, but it can also be a liability. The two politicians answer to a different sets of critics, with questions of a different kind, and answer them from different points of view. But they both have the same advantage of not being descendants of slaves.
AG: Or the disadvantage, if you take into account a certain tradition of thinking about black authenticity in the U.S. What do you make of all the campaign rhetoric that emphasizes his work as a community organizer in Chicago? Is he trying to use this to make him more of an authentic American black man, with experience of poverty, drugs, struggle, with his “roots” in Chicago? Community would be the key word here, I guess.

ES: The right used this against him—not because they thought it was illegitimate, but they claimed he was magnifying it beyond its actual worth. And they may have been partly correct. The community organizing might have been the strongest card he had to play. And yes, the African “rootedness” and the Chicago experience work well together. One might say that was part of his political calculation from the very beginning. I don’t know enough about the details of his earlier career to judge to what extent he was calculating a public image from the start, from moment he entered politics as a community organizer. The cynical view would be that from the moment he moved to Chicago he was envisioning a political life of which this would be an attractive beginning. I don’t know that I share this view, but I wouldn’t be shocked or surprised if it were true. He wouldn’t be the first politician to do so.

AG: As you were saying before, there is nothing spontaneous about the way he managed the issue of race. Managing your self-image is part of being a politician. But let’s get back to the way he deals with race in his speeches.

ES: One of the points I make is that Obama doesn’t cite black American historical figures as much as one might expect.

AG: Even Martin Luther King...

ES: Yes, precisely. In his acceptance speech after the nomination on the 40th anniversary of the March on Washington he does not name King.

AG: Doesn’t the spectacular evasion of King’s name make it even more prominent?

ES: My theory is that it is a subtle way of taking on King’s authority—he is reminding the nation that King’s speech has become part of its system of thinking. But I argue that he is also self-consciously replicating what King did with Lincoln at the March on Washington—he did not name Lincoln.
AG: If you watched the acceptance events as a whole that day you would notice how there was less and less of King as the day progressed. The celebration starts with a documentary film on King and the March, then there are speeches by black people, including King’s children, and then it gets whiter and whiter as time passes, leading up to the acceptance speech.

ES: That should have been utterly predictable. All the things that might drag the party down into a set of associations it’s uncomfortable with are gotten out of the way early in the convention, so that the message can become more universal, more inclusively American.

AG: Not naming King and other great figures from black history is certainly significant. But then there certainly are echoes of the black tradition, a certain sermon-like quality of the rhetoric, with its emphasis on hope and overcoming diversity. If you read the “Race speech” side by side with Frederick Douglass’s “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” there is a clear parallel—both insist on black belonging and accuse the nation of not being as inclusive as it claims to be. And there are traces of the Marxist argument about race being used by conservatives to deflect attention from social inequality, from class. The Republican Party is encouraging you to be a racist to keep your mind off what corporations are doing to your money—that’s the gist of it. Obama sounds a lot like Richard Wright on this issue.

ES: First, perhaps, one needs to address the question of authorship. With presidents in particular one likes to speak of what John F. Kennedy said on a particular occasion, or even what George Bush said, though you’d never imagine he wrote his speeches himself. Well, Obama is clearly capable of writing a very fine speech, though we know he has speechwriters. But I think as in the case with his advisors generally, when I speak of Obama giving a particular speech, I just have to assume these are the words he would have chosen had he the time to do it. Now to get back to your point about Douglass. You wonder to what extent a speech like “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” is consciously echoed in the “More Perfect Union” speech. I have no doubt that Obama is perfectly conversant with famous speeches and texts by African Americans. He has internalized this rhetoric to the point that he would easily externalize them as part of his own rhetoric. But it seems to me that he sets aside—I wouldn’t say misses, but sets aside—opportunities to cite by name or even by direct quotation famous black Americans.
AG: Do you see this as primarily a tactical move on the part of Obama and his campaign? Or do you see it as meaningful—a strategic gesture towards the transcending of race as a category?

ES: I think it is both things together. I don’t think Obama himself would subscribe to the simple idea that America is in a post-racial moment. Nor would I. But it is true that the nation has clearly passed a milestone—however trivial this may sound. It has passed a barrier which many African Americans of previous generations thought we would never pass. When Obama was nominated, and then especially when he was elected, many older black Americans—and I mean people in their fifties, not just those in their eighties or nineties—were saying “I never thought this would happen in my lifetime.”

AG: I am neither black nor fifty, and I felt the same way. Another half century, that’s how long I thought it would take.

ES: It is undeniable. It has happened. And it’s undeniable that it means something. It doesn’t mean race is over. And there a handful of people who will continue to see him as a “Black President,” who will judge him as a black man, not a politician. But this is now a tiny part of the population. We have passed a milestone.

AG: What do you make of the academic or journalistic statements such as Hollinger’s book *Post-ethnic America*—arguments about the arrival of post-racial times? And how do you see the relationship between academic debates and social realities on the race issue?

ES: One has to be skeptical of the idea that we have entered a new era. Things develop incrementally. In some ways academic developments are a sign of things to come. By the same token, however, academic politics and academic institutional life is in some ways a drag on the nation, in so far as I would guess that a greater proportion of academics than the general public would insist that that we have not entered a post-racial era. Now, they would say that the general public is naďve and deceived, but the general public might say that academics have a vested interest in continuing the politics of racial grievance. Or worse—after all they have devoted centers of study, departments and so on that are devoted to the idea that these categories exist, that they matter.
AG: Do you see yourself reconsidering some of your claims of *Wake the Nations*? I read it as a book that argues that race is the American unconscious, and that it's not going away any time soon... It seems to be going away faster than you believed possible.

ES: It is an ongoing debate, and you will see a whole spectrum of opinions. This will remain the case for a long time to come. There are people out there who claim that the one drop rule is obsolete, and those who say it is decisive in American life. To me, it is illuminating to see how an increasing number of students in California are unwilling to identify themselves as members of any given category. They reject the categorizations.

AG: The Census now allows you to do so. The 2000 Census made it possible to mark more than one category, and introduced a sixth option: “other.”

ES: That’s right. And of course the university also collects data for its own purposes. Increasingly, students are not willing to put themselves in any category even if many of their friends would identify them as African American or Asian Americans, or whatever it might be, and even if they themselves might do so in their private lives.

AG: Does this also mean that students are increasingly opponents of affirmative action?

ES: Not necessarily. It strikes me, however, that they are less willing to be identified as its beneficiaries.

AG: What is the admissions policy at UCLA?

ES: It is color-blind. By state law we are not permitted to consider race or ethnicity in the admissions process. There are significant arguments, however, about to the degree to which the University continues to do so by a form of subterfuge.

AG: Subterfuge? How?

ES: They do it mainly by analyzing what a student says in an admissions essay. The assumption is that what is being looked for in addition to a spectrum of characteristics and preparations for university life is a disadvantage that a student
AG: You can’t bracket race completely, because it is so tightly linked to economics, don’t you think?

ES: No, you can’t. But the point is not to give it precedence over economic disadvantage. And that was Martin Luther King’s argument from the very beginning: his distinct preference was to address economic disadvantage, and not race as such. Like many of his generation he recognized that this would help blacks significantly because they have suffered from economic disadvantage disproportionately.

AG: And what is your view?

ES: I agree that economic disadvantage needs to be taken into account, and not ethnic or racial categories. That is a far more justifiable point of view. There has always been a significant degree of resentment about rich people being beneficiaries of affirmative action. Just to give an example from another group than blacks, very wealthy Chinese Americans would be given an advantage, simply because they belonged to the category covered by affirmative action. And it was partly this that brought about bans on affirmative action, both at university and state level. So I agree with the shift—that economics should be the basis and not race. For one thing, that is the evolution of the practice and the law. For another, it is what King favored. I am sure that decisions of the Supreme Court will continue to chip away at preferences based on race and ethnicity. And I think Obama is perfectly comfortable with it, though of course there will be those who object to his being comfortable with it.

AG: Is race ceasing to matter also in marriage?

ES: Oh, yes. I don’t know what the statistics of intermarriage itself are, but the percentage of people who say they don’t object to intermarriage rose dramatically during the course of the 20th century. Not just in California, but perhaps especially in California, mixing has been going on in unpredictable ways for several generations. One might say it is no more mixed than Du Bois was, if one had imagined all the ethnic strains other than African American of which he was a product. But the census decreed certain categories historically, so that one wouldn’t recognize, say, French, Swedish, and Polish as a “mixture” of some sort.
AG: Such is the logic of race as a construct based on the “one drop rule.” Blackness matters. Nothing else matters quite as much. Of course, the question is to what extent—if at all—that rule still exists in people’s minds. But I am tempted to ask you a more general question. Is the present shift in thinking about race also a change in the way Americans think of their national identity? Is this just about admitting another minority, or is the definition of Americanness as such changing?

ES: I think the shift is real and profound, which is not to say it is real across the board. There certainly are communities where assimilation seems impossible. Many blacks continue to hold the view that descendants of slaves can never be truly Americans, that is, be accepted as Americans. They point to their own particular experience of racism and say I will always be seen as a “nigger,” I will never be fully American. And they will reject claims to the contrary, even when those claims are made by a black President...

AG: And yet the fact that a person saying such things is the President makes a difference.

ES: Of course it does. Also, you can’t deny the effect it will have on black children—he himself has said this. Now, if Obama fails—and he is bound to fail in some respects—his failure will not be attributed to race. It may happen, but seems unlikely. A generation ago, even half a generation ago—in the case of, say, Jesse Jackson—it would have been entirely predictable that his political failures be attributed to race. Not necessarily the fact that he is black, but that he brings with him a sense of racial grievance and demand. That won’t happen to Obama, because he is already understood as having attempted to transcend race understood as the grounds for bitterness or grievance. In that sense we have passed a milestone.