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The Browning of a Paradigm: Latinos in Neither Black nor White

by Rudy G. Hernandez
Michigan State University

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"When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing."

Adrienne Rich, *Invisibility in Academe[1]*

Racial oppression and conflict have been pervasive and significant features of the American society since the formation of the United States. Indeed, they were critical to the formation of the United States and, in part, remain responsible for its present-day global stature (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Bonacich, 2000). They also have worked as agents to stratify life within the United States (Hacker, 1992; Massey & Denton, 1993; Feagin, 2000).

Presently, few scholars would dispute that racial stratification remains an unfortunate reality in the U.S. However, the tendency and rationale for social science literature to treat race and racism in the United States as solely and uniquely an historic relation between white and black Americans is a contentious argument among some scholars who study non-black communities of color. Proponents of the black-white paradigm defend their approach with historical arguments.

They give African Americans primacy and most legitimacy within the United States' long history of oppression of non-whites. It is reasoned by African American's long-lived status as the largest hence most visible minority group in the U.S.; and their communities' demographic concentration being within sectors of U.S. hardest hit by our restructuring economy — the urban rust belt (Wilson, 1987; Moore & Pinderhughes, 1993; Feagin, 2000; Massey & Denton, 1993; Hacker, 1992). In contrast, for the past three decades, Latino/a, Asian American, Native American, and other progressive scholars have called for more inclusive and contemporarily relevant theories (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1998); new conceptual frameworks with revised historical perspectives through which to analyze race and racism in the United States (Vaca, 1967; Mirande, 1987; Acuna,

2000; Acuna, 2000b); to abandon an age-old black-white paradigm of race that simply dichotomizes a very complex part of American life, and casts entire racialized segments of American society into invisibility (Omi & Winant, 1994; Moore & Pinderhughes, 1993; Rodriguez, 2000).

This publication charts a course through the above-mentioned debate. It necessarily attempts to problematize the black-white paradigm (the binary paradigm) in ways that demonstrate how it falls short of capturing important essences of Latino communities, even in a broad sense. Although it would be much more accurate to describe the binary paradigm's defense as persistent and pervasive — sometimes insidious — I propose that the binary paradigm is manifested and perpetuated in a few different ways, of which I will concentrate on three. First, there are few scholars who actually and actively make arguments in its defense. Second, many scholars recognize its limitations for analysis, but rationalize its use for lack of a better alternative. Third, some scholars have highly contested Wilson's underclass thesis as limited by its dichotomous nature, and call for its modification. In conclusion, I will show how the paradigm does not reflect racial reality and how its pervasive use is potentially, and perhaps intentionally, used as a source to suppress coalitions that can work against white supremacy.

The Construction of a Paradigm:
The Color-line

Rudy Acuña, in laying the groundwork for his concept of the "American Paradigm," wrote of the origin of the concept of paradigms, and the strength and tenacity that characterize them:

"[E]very field of study has an established order of structural guidelines that influence the thinking and actions of its scientists and social scientists. Within these fields, existing paradigms restrict the growth of new competing models."

Kuhn likened a paradigm to a textbook which laid out the definitions and accepted truths in the field — its basic assumptions and methodology… "The validity of a given paradigm has nothing to do with whether it is right or wrong… Its validity is determined by its power to bring about results. The paradigm determines the important topics and questions of research in a field" (Acuna, 2000b, pp.35).

Race, in black and white, is arguably one of the most persistent paradigms to have entered the American psyche. It affects us all, and it is as powerfully divisive as it is potentially unifying; exclusive as much as it is inclusive since race is the point where most of us formulate our initial assumptions about people (Rodriguez, et.al., 1991) and the institutions associated with groups of people. Although race cannot be used as a reliable scientific or biological means for classification, it does have profound social meaning. And, it is precisely this meaning that is the root of increasing interest and scrutiny among some scholars of color.

As we inch our way into the 21st Century, W.E.B. DuBois' prophetic statement, made virtually a century ago, that the problem of the 20th Century is the "color-line" (DuBois, 1903), retains much of its initial salience. In the wake of slavery and in the midst of Jim Crow segregation, clearly, the line to which DuBois referred was the one that separated whites from blacks. That period, like now, was marked by an economy that was changing. Our nation, as well as the world around it, was industrializing. In the late 1800's and early 1900's, there was a constant flow of European immigrants to meet industrial labor demands.

The First World War, however, stemmed the flow of immigration from Europe. Consequently, the war industry created a demand for manpower, which was quickly filled by African Americans who migrated en masse from the South to urban centers in the Midwest and Northeast (Drake & Clayton, 1945). The next several decades marked a period that included the urbanization of black America — which effectively situated them at the bottom of the socio-economic scale. That period was accompanied by a transformative process by which ethnic European migrants morphed into an Anglo-American prototype; the birth of white as an indistinguishable group (Alba, 1990; Waldinger, 2001). And, it is this period that is, arguably, the foundation on which the binary paradigm is structured; a time which contributed significantly to developing the current structure of opportunity; and solidified the U.S. into two distinct and unequal nations, one black, the other white (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Massey & Denton, 1993; Hacker, 1992) — and as an afterthought, intermediate groups who are in many ways racialized, but who have managed to distance themselves socially from African Americans and who have and will continue to proximate themselves to Euro-Americans (Hacker, 1992).

According to Feagin, in order to appreciate the unshakable validity of this view and to understand that oppression in the U.S. of all other non-black, non-European groups has been built on a system that centered substantially on white-on-black oppression wrought from slavery and the Jim Crow era, non-black people of color are:

"require[d] to [dig] deeply into U.S. history to examine the systemic racism built into the foundation of the new nation by European entrepreneurs and colonists in the 17th and 18th Centuries, as they enslaved Africans and killed or drove away Native Americans. By the middle of the 17th Century those enslaved were viewed by whites, and their legal system, as chattel property — a category that by the 1820's was composed almost entirely of black Americans. This cruel white-on-black oppression was soon well-institutionalized and rationalized in racist ideology, and has lasted now for nearly four centuries.

Thus, white-on-black oppression is much more than a 'black-white paradigm,' conceptual framework… "It is a comprehensive system of exploitation and oppression designed by white Americans for black Americans, a system of racism that for centuries has penetrated every major area of American society and thus shaped the lives of every American, black and nonblack" (Feagin, 2000, pp.204).

Feagin has cleverly created an argument that casts people who challenge the binary paradigm as people who challenge history; who challenge the gravity and immorality of the way in which white America has treated Africans and African Americans. Denying the intentional brutality and pernicious treatment that African Americans in the U.S. have encountered throughout its history would be purely and simply irresponsible. However, questioning the paradigm is not tantamount to questioning history. Rather, it is questioning whether white supremacy in the U.S. is also responsible for manufacturing a narrow view of history that has excluded groups of people (Bonilla-Silva, 2001), and their contributions, thus producing a deliberate void that heaves non-black, non-white Americans into invisibility and casts a cloud of ignorance over our society about the origins, contributions and present day situations of peoples who do not fit neatly, if at all, into the binary paradigm (Acuna, 2000; Acuna, 2000b).

A glaring paradox in Feagin's reasoning is that we *can* dig deeply in history to uncover white America's deplorable record with African Americans, while it is the exclusionary essence of the binary paradigm, itself, that has made, and will continue to make, it next to impossible to do the same for other non-white groups. True, the history of the relationship is long and complicated between black and white Americans. A whole civil war was fought over the relationship. The age and tenacity, alone, of the binary paradigm reflects the fact that African Americans, regardless of how they have been treated, have never been inconsequential or invisible to American institutions nor the psyches of white Americans (Blauner, 2001). In contrast,

the relationship that Latinos have with black and white Americans is relatively short, and much less complicated if one considers their history in this nation and on the continent to have begun 150 years ago. But, that is not the case. Latinos' history with Europeans, Africans, Asians, and Native Americans on this continent, and what is now this country, actually predates Jamestown. The fact that most Latinos are a mixture of the above peoples (mestizo), and look it, belies the young history that Feagin and others imply they have.

What Feagin and others who defend the binary paradigm through historic or primacy arguments are implicitly saying is that Latinos are foreign, therefore do not belong in the racial order. In this respect, the binary paradigm perpetuates the Eurocentric notion that history on the North American continent began in Jamestown and worked itself west. This narrow view of history limits most Americans' ability to conceptualize the colonization of the Americas as a whole brutal process that displaced, converted and slaughtered Native Americans, enslaved Africans, and created a Euro-dominated hemisphere, indeed perhaps the greatest racial formation project of all time (Omi & Winant, 1994). The consequence of such a narrow view of history should come as no surprise that both whites and blacks become puzzled when they meet a Latino who looks black or white (Omi & Winant, 1994) — or rather, not "foreign" but "American" and therefore a legitimate member of the racial order. A peculiar situation indeed is that the profile used by the Border Patrol to spot "illegal aliens" is one of a person who actually appears to be Native American.

"Our ability to interpret racial meanings depends on preconceived notions of a racialized social structure" (Omi & Winant, 1994, pp.59). And, the U.S. educational system is a "critical component" of this process as it is there that children learn to racialize themselves and others because this is where (mostly white) children gain experience with people of other "colors" (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001, pp.51). But, the opportunities for mostly white children to experience and learn from many such encounters are presently scarce. It has been

well documented that our educational system is highly stratified along racial/ethnic lines, meaning most white children are attending suburban schools while most non-white children attend inner-city schools (Wilson, 1996; Fordham, 1996; Romo & Falbo, 1996).

This neosegregation can only promise to continue and to intensify, as our nation becomes more and more economically stratified and accompanied by racial polarization (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Wilson, 1996). What is more probable than the scenario Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) present is that most white children will learn to racialize from the system without the benefit of what increasingly more black, brown, and yellow children are attaining from interacting with each other, albeit in the lower social strata (Wilson, 1996). Ultimately, the underlying outdated and increasingly less useful lesson that is taught to all children in the U.S. educational system is one that perpetuates our current dichotomous racial order. As Signithia Fordham (1996, pp.64) so provocatively states:

> "In America, schooling gives status to one cultural face: 'whiteness,' in all its varieties. These include rituals like baptisms, family gatherings of all kinds that mimic the practices of the dominant population, holidays (St. Patrick's Day, Columbus day, Christmas, Easter), and so forth. Thus, whatever is affiliated with whiteness becomes what is normalized — the essence of what is labeled knowledge, goodness and so on, and is therefore human and virtuous. whiteness as a cultural symbol and category is at the center of racial discrimination… It is the social glue that maintains existing racial practices. And it is central to the process that equates whiteness with rightness."

In Bob Blauner's latest edition of his 30-year-old seminal work on racial oppression, he describes the resultant ignorance produced by the existing racial practices of the educational system. He speaks about the obscurity of the history related to Mexican Americans almost 150 years after the cessation of the Mexican-American War, which resulted in the incorporation of over one-half of Mexico's territory and the Anglo domination of a considerable amount of brown people (Acuna, 2000). Little has changed since he pointed out:

> "Even informed Anglos know almost nothing about La Raza, its historical experience, its present situation, its collective moods. And the average citizen notion that Chicanos have been lynched in the Southwest and continue to be abused by police, that an entire population has been exploited economically, dominated politically, and raped culturally. In spite of the racism that attempts to wipe out or, failing that, distort and trivialize the history and culture of the colonized, both expert and man in the street are far more aware of the past and present oppression suffered by blacks" (Blauner, 2001, pp.168).

In many ways Feagin's reasoning in defending the binary paradigm's utility in contemporary analysis is tautological. The underlying messages of challenging arguments made by Latinos are that the binary paradigm is too narrow; it perpetuates an ignorance about their historical and contemporary experiences, or forces them to choose methodologies and theories that either focus on assimilation (white immigrant) or African American experiences, neither of which apply; and it is oppressive in many ways. His answer is that it is all of the above because it is really a system of oppression that affects us all.

Feagin envisions the black-white paradigm as a continuum that graduates the raciality of Asian American, Latinos, Native Americans, and other "new groups of people of color… on a white-to-black status continuum, the common gauge of social acceptability" (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001, pp.56). However Hacker implies that because most Latinos (as well as Asian Americans) are not black, they will inevitably join white society (assimilate) (Hacker, 1992, pp.19). It is ironic that the same people who argue to maintain an exclusionary racial order will be bound to create much tension between racial/ethnic groups because they imply that Latinos and Asian Americans have, and will

continue to be, a part of oppressive and exploitative white supremacy. Ultimately, both Feagin's and Hacker's efforts to give centrality and primacy to white supremacy and black oppression within the discourse of race reinforces the binary paradigm further as a way to perpetuate a white supremacist notion (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). As Feagin indicated (2000, pp.220, italics mine), "it has been shown that whites, *especially elite whites,* who set the terms for each group's incorporation into U.S. society, for the level of economic and political development, and for the character and degree of the racial oppression they face."

Wilsonian Poverty:
The Binary Paradigm Reinforced

When poverty was exposed by the Johnson Administration in the 1960's, it was presented as a deep divide, one that prophesied, the country "moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal" (Massey & Denton, 1993, pp.4). While he did not coin the term "culture of poverty," Daniel Moynihan, during the same period, solidified the relationship between race (blacks), poverty and pathological cultural tendencies (although not intentionally) as an inseparable entity. This resulted in a popular and scholarly interpretation that African Americans were a perpetual "underclass" (Massey & Denton, 1993). Most disconcerting about the underclass model is that it also implied that African American culture intrinsically perpetuated its own condition, which generated widely held misbeliefs and stereotypes about the African American community (Mirandé, 1987).

While the culture vs. structure debate raged, William J. Wilson argued that factors related to economic class were more important than racial discrimination in understanding the problems of African Americans. But, in 1987, Wilson produced a truly seminal piece that ushered in a new way of thinking about persistent poverty and race that has significantly shaped how we think, even today.

In *The Truly Disadvantaged,* Wilson (1987) made the connection between persistent urban poverty — "the urban underclass" — and the changing structure of the economy, which he characterized as the de-industrialization, suburbanization of jobs, and a decline in mid-level jobs (Massey & Denton, 1993; Moore & Pinderhughes, 1993). He also pointed toward the "radical isolation" of the black poor because of white flight and civil rights laws which made possible the "out-migration" of more successful African Americans from urban centers (Wilson, 1987, pp.50). In an extension to this work, Wilson (1996) characterized the "new urban poverty," driven by the U.S. transition from a manufacturing to a service economy, as poor, segregated areas in which most adults either are unemployed or have opted out of the workforce completely. Joblessness and other characteristics of ghettos — lack of semi-skilled and low-skilled jobs, the out-migration of the black middle class that offered positive role models, and the rise of single-parent families — were exacerbated, especially for black males, even after civil-rights era gains.

Indeed, Wilson's work has been pivotal in providing us with greater understanding of how the changing economy has effected much of our inner-city populations. But it has also produced a trend in scholarship that makes it very difficult to understand race (and racial discrimination) *outside the domain of urban black poverty* (Gans, 1990; Moore & Pinderhughes, 1993). It has even proven to be problematic for some African American scholars studying non-poor, black communities (Patillo-McCoy, 1999). For instance, Patillo-McCoy (1999) challenges Wilson's treatment of the black middle class. She argues that the out-migration of the black middle class was not a simple process and they did not go far. Instead, they moved to an area that was spatially connected to both the black inner-city neighborhoods and white middle-class areas, acting in many ways as a social buffer between the two communities and still very much affected by discrimination.

The Question of Convenience:
The Underclass and Hispanic Tagalongs

Until relatively recent times, Latino experiences were not given much attention outside their respective communities. In the few cases that these communities were subjects of scholarly research, they were characterized as "passive, and non-participants in [their] history or as belonging to a fatalistic culture" (Padilla, 1994, pp.13). Baca Zinn (1995, pp.183) attributes their exclusion in the social sciences and race relations analysis to the binary paradigm, in which race is treated as the exclusive "property of African Americans, or of African Americans and whites." Mainstream sociology has long treated Latinos as "simply another variant of standard ethnic immigrants" (Baca Zinn, 1995, pp.183). But Wilson's underclass scholarship came at a time when Latinos were becoming more visible (Hernandez, 1994) — *Hispanicization* — when there was a surge in interest of urban poverty (Massey, Zambrana & Alonzo Bell, 1995), when mainstream scholarship acknowledged that Latinos were also structurally denied opportunities (Baca Zinn, 1995). There were several Latino scholars who were "insiders" and sensitive to issues and who were researching and reporting on Latino communities. The confluence of these four events created a good opportunity for Latino scholars to challenge the binary paradigm.

However, the same circumstances that created the opportunity to challenge the binary paradigm also created extremely complicated race relations between African Americans and Latinos. For example, while the official use of the term "Hispanic" by the federal government effectively and very quickly created a nationwide, but symbolic, community (Rodriguez, 2000), "[pan-ethnic unity among Latinos] had been fostered by a state that ha[d] expanded through an emphasis on ethnicity and the competition for resources" (Padilla as cited in Oboler, 1995).

Also during this period, demographers noted that the growth rate of the "Hispanic community" was foretelling of a time when their numbers would constitute a major portion of the minority community, which meant new forms of social inequality and ethnic conflict for the future (Baca Zinn, 1995) and a heightened a sense that Latinos were moving in on the territory of African Americans, both figuratively and literally.

While many Latino scholars who have studied poverty understand and appreciate the structural significance of Wilson's underclass model, many have thought (and still think) it was a limited tool in interpreting the experiences of Latinos. As a consequence, many call for new theories, methods, and analytic tools that are yet untested and for which it would have been difficult to find funding within an increasingly competitive atmosphere (Massey, Zambrana & Alonzo Bell, 1995).

> "Instead, of facing this daunting prospect, researchers generally took the path of least resistance and worked within the underclass paradigm… [T]he wisdom of this tag-along strategy seems questionable. Efforts to insert Latinos into studies of the underclass generally failed. Not only were they resisted by poverty researchers, they irritated some African American scholars, who saw Latinos trying to muscle their way into the poverty limelight" (Massey, Zambrana & Alonzo Bell, 1995, pp.192).

Therefore, a great deal of scholarship that has focused on poverty-related issues in racial/ethnic communities, has treated Latinos as an addendum or an afterthought to scholarship that is still focused primarily on issues in African American communities, or uses frameworks rooted in Wilson's concepts, originally designed for analysis of urban black communities to research and interpret Latino and their institutions (Massey, Zambrana & Alonzo Bell, 1995). As a result, instead of occupying a separate and unique space within the U.S. society and the racial order, Latinos became an "other" minority, force-fitted into a system not designed to accommodate them.

The Underclass Modified:
Poverty and Life Outside the Rust belt

Some scholars (Velez-Ibanez, 1993; Rodriguez, 1993; Moore & Vigil, 1993) interested in poverty in Latino communities see and appreciate the critical importance of a structural approach to understand the causes of poverty in Latino communities. But, the dichotomous nature of Wilson's thinking makes it inapplicable to Latinos; if it is to be useful, it has to be modified (Moore & Pinderhughes, 1993). Wilson's work framed poverty to be primarily the domain of urban black ghettos in the rust belt suffering the effects of a swiftly changing economy whose situation was intensified by segregation caused by, among other things, the out-migration by the black middle class. Indeed Latinos were, as was the whole country, affected by changes in the economy. But the change was not uniform and the effects were not uniformly felt, even by barrios situated in the urban rust belt (Sullivan, 1993; Tienda, 1993).

In fact, most barrios were located outside those heavily industrialized areas in the rust belt. Instead of out-migration they were experiencing immigration, which proved to be critical to their economies in many ways; and still experiencing abject poverty (Moore & Pinderhughes, 1993; Velez-Ibanez, 1993). These barrios, instead of reflecting the "history of slavery, Jim Crow legislation, and struggles for civil and economic rights... reflect a history of conquest, immigration, and a struggle to maintain cultural identity" (Moore & Pinderhughes, 1993, pp.xvii). Some of these barrios in the West and Southwest predate the U.S.; others in the rust belt have been active for nearly a century. Their long and unique history in the U.S. and the conflation of the issues mentioned above qualify Latinos, especially Puerto Ricans and Chicanos, to occupy a unique place within a schema used to plot racial oppression in the U.S. (Oboler, 1995); and militate against applying paradigms and conceptual frameworks, to interpret communities and their institutions, that are constructed for the use of analyzing other racialized groups.

Furthermore, Wilson's work has been pivotal in keeping the research lens on poor black communities, which is in many ways good; there is justifiable reason for continued concern. Although I believe that their main point is that race and racial stratification in the U.S. has always been more complex than a simple binary paradigm suggests, the issues raised by Velez-Ibanez (1993), Rodriguez (1993), Moore and Vigil (1993), Moore and Pinderhughes (1993) and Sullivan (1993) imply that — as we proceed in a new century — there is a need to consider carefully that globalizing economies are in many ways simultaneously responsible for African American poverty, increased immigration from Mexico and other parts of Latin American and Asia, and some of the poorest neighborhoods in the U.S. being shared by African Americans and Latinos (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1998; Alba, 1998). These facts are quickly necessitating a global view for a complete comprehension of the dynamics of racial stratification in the U.S., and racial identity.

The Demographic Revolution:
The Obvious Polemic

Without wanting to be overly dramatic, I see people of color in the U.S. to be in the process of an important social revolution, one that necessarily promises to shift our national identity from a black and white one to a more colorful one. Like most, this revolution is a mix of promise and peril, winners and losers, and divided along economic, racial, and ethnic lines. There is no planned strategy or conspiracy in the social revolution. The foundations of this revolution are clear for everyone to see in the nation's vital statistics. For some time, the white birth rate has been falling to a point where it is now below the zero population growth level. The African-American birthrate is down, too, but not by nearly as much as the white birthrate. The Latino birthrate, however, continues to be higher than the rate of all the others while the Asian-American birthrate is between the rates for blacks and Latinos (Zuberi, 2001). Add to these facts the unprecedented amounts of Asian and Latin American migrants being absorbed into these minority populations and the projection seems quite clear: A U.S. society that will be neither black nor white in the not too distant future (Alba, 1998).

Along with these trends, there are dramatic issues that loudly call into question the legitimacy and utility of maintaining a dichotomous national racial identity and psyche.

Immigration over the past three decades has drastically diversified the American landscape. A pivotal change in immigration policy in 1965 lowered the barriers for migration from non-European countries (Walinger, 2001). Since then the U.S. has received 27 million immigrants, of whom 85% came from non-European countries, 52% from North, Central, and South America (including the Caribbean, but excluding Canada), 29% came from Asia, and only 15% came from Europe and Canada (Rumbaut, 1998). This predominance of non-European immigration since the enactment of the Immigration Act of 1965 and the Immigration Regulation and Control Act (IRCA) of 1987, make the present day a time when the United States population is more racially and ethnically diverse than at any other in our history.

A recent swell of literature related to the subject has revealed many very poignant facts about the social, economic, and political events that have driven major increases and decreases in migration. For instance, the ebb and flow of Mexicans across the border have been tied historically to the surplus of — and demand for — cheap labor in the U.S. (Waldinger, 2001). Presently, the trend toward global economic integration is fueling immigration; NAFTA is the primary driving force encouraging Mexican migration (Massey, 1998). Most of the new wave (post 1965) migrants are headed straight for already heavily burdened inner-cities where the new economy has created a demand for exceedingly low-skilled, low waged employment — quite reminiscent of older waves of European migration. However, the literature also indicates in other ways that this new wave of migrants is not at all like old waves of European "ethnic" immigrants who joined the pot and melted together as part of the white community; the traditional assimilation model.

Today, immigrants have less "ethnic" options and their communities are more transnational (Waters, 1998; Levitt, 2001), both of which have major implications in how immigrants are socially and racially situated in the U.S. These factors raise questions about how this new diversity is influencing the racial order.

The reasonable interpretation of these events by "dichotomists"[2] is that there is not going to be a non-white majority in the 21st Century. Rather, whites, Asians Americans, and Latinos are merging together as one community from which African Americans are increasingly excluded. This is a trend that will create a new dichotomy between blacks and non-blacks; one comprised of mostly a white and Mixed-race majority on one side, and blacks on the other (Hacker, 1992). It appears that the fundamental principles guiding this thesis are assimilation — in a crude sense — and an assumption that the white oppressive system will attempt to maintain its ruling-class social control (over blacks) by the manipulation of "race/ethnicity." And it is happening at a time when there is a national sense that resources and opportunities secured by an *African American* civil rights struggle of the 1960's are no longer necessary, or are increasingly threatened by hordes of non-European, non-deserving immigrants.

Alba (1998, pp.189-19) asserts that a dichotomous future is not an entirely impossible proposition if the racial/ethnic categories we use today change and if there are "large shifts [of people] from one category to another, as might be produced by assimilation." That race and ethnicity are "socio-historical construct[s] whose meanings vary widely over time and space" has become an all but axiomatic principle in sociology (Almaguer, 1994, pp.9). In addition, there is a well-documented historical record of the federal government manipulating these categories (Rodriguez, 2000). Alba does not suggest that assimilation will occur the way it did in the past however he cautions that the possibility for "segmented assimilation" or other variants should not be dismissed a priori (pp. 19).

But, the term "assimilation" implies that there is a normative vision of national life and culture — the mainstream — and that new groups should change (Waldinger, 2001). This issue is a slippery one and should be approached with much caution, as the concept of assimilation has been overused to portray non-white communities, especially Latino ones, as culturally deficient, static, unable to change, and the cause of Latino's social problems (Massey, Zambrana & Alonzo Bell, 1995).

The traditional model of assimilation portrays a linear and very simple trajectory from one country, national identity, and culture to the mainstream of America. It implies that people leave their country of origin and never look back. It also implies that there are monumental differences between origins and destinies, something we know to be false (Waldinger, 2001). Of course it represents an overly simplistic model that glosses over the rich contextual experiences that European immigrants had, white Americans have, and it deracializes whites.

However, new literature tells us that whiteness is complicated and is definitely racialized. Its racial markers are power and privilege, one of which is the privilege that whites have to see themselves as not being racialized — outside of the racial milieu (McIntosh, 1994; Roediger, 1999). In addition, globalization, the same force responsible in many ways for contemporary immigration also distinguishes it from immigration of yore, as immigrants today can be characterized as being members of diasporic communities or as being a part of a transnational flow of peoples that carry with them, capital, media, politics, and culture between their origin and destiny. All of which contributes to shaping and reshaping their racial identity in the U.S. and abroad (Louie, 2000).

Another major difference between earlier European ethnics and Asian Americans and Latino migrants is that the latter groups are racialized as non-whites. To be sure, both ethnicity and race are socially constructed (Omi, 2001; Alba, 1990). But, European ethnics have the privilege of being able to exercise options not available to many people who are ascribed a non-white racial identity; European ethnics have the option to become white (Waters,

1998). Today, the character of their original European ethnicity is largely "symbolic" (Gans, 1979; Waters, 1998). Because of intermarriage, they often have a wide combination of ethnic titles from which to choose — many hyphens. They can be Italian-American one day, Polish-American the next, or even, my personal favorite, "Heinz 57." Or "they cope with diversity by ignoring it, and raise their children as non-ethnics" (Gans, 1979, pp.13). In fact, white Americans can claim almost any European ethnicity without many implications or even inconveniences to their lives. Herbert Gans, who first used the phrase "symbolic ethnicity" describes it as "a self-conscious effort to 'feel ethnic' to the exclusion of being ethnic… an ethnicity of last resort, in terms of a gradual, albeit inevitable withering of ethnic differences among Americans of European ancestries… ethnicity exists on the outer fringes of the lives of many white Americans. They do not relinquish or embrace ethnic identity entirely; rather, they adapt it to their current circumstances, selecting from their ethnic heritage a few symbolic elements… turning ethnicity thereby into an occasionally practiced avocation" (Alba, 1995, pp.29).

In contrast, Mary Waters (1998, pp.405) describes how these ethnic options are denied to racialized peoples in the U.S.:

"Black Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and American Indians do not have the option of symbolic ethnicity at present in the United States. For all the ways that ethnicity does not matter to white Americans, it does matter for non-whites. Who your ancestors are does affect your choice of spouse, where you live, what job you have, who your friends are, and what your chances are for success in American society, if your ancestors happen not to be from Europe. The reality is that white ethnics have a lot more choice and room for maneuver than they themselves think they do. The situation is very different for members of racial minorities, whose lives are strongly influenced by their race or their national origin regardless of how much they may choose not to identify themselves in terms of their ancestries."

Waters goes on to declare that a dangerous consequence to symbolic ethnicity is that many white people believe that their ethnic experiences equate with those of racial minorities whose ethnicities are enforced and imposed, therefore it prevents whites from understanding racial inequality. Whites reason that their ancestors were also immigrants, or discriminated against at one time or another and they turned out just fine — with no help or intervention from the federal government. But Latinos' and Asian Americans' experiences as racial "others" differ from those of African Americans, as well as from each other. African Americans are typically viewed as *opposed* to white where Asian and Latinos are considered *different* from whites (Waters, 1998).

For Latinos and Asian Americans, racialized "other" equates with foreigner — newcomer (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). And the newcomer status provides the backdrop for xenophobic attitudes that undergird in many ways the larger political drama of prevailing race relations (debate around black-white paradigm) during these uncertain economic times. Therefore, our present-day race conundrum is one — of a competition for resources — that begs to explain why the influx of Asian American and Latino newcomers, who often arrive possessing fewer skills than do urban blacks to compete in a service economy, has not considerably subsided in many de-industrialized inner-cities. In fact, studies show that most (all) population growth in inner-cities over the past decade has been due to Asian and Latino influx (Zuberi, 2001). However, the situation of inner-city black communities seems to decline or to stagnate as immigrant populations seem to thrive in their midst. And this has lead to a chasm in how an explanation is approached.

On one hand, race relations and xenophobic attitudes have only been inflamed over the past decade by the language used in popular media to trumpet research announcing the "Browning of America" or that the emergent Latino population was going to "overtake" African Americans as the "dominant" minority group; to a lesser extent the rapidly increasing Asian presence. This fashioned an image that newcomers were also going to "overtake" the dwindling resources and jobs in central cities — those jobs that had not already been relocated to Mexico, Asia, or the suburbs (Lim, 2001). In addition, the resources and political influence gained through the efforts of the Civil Rights movement, which is popularly considered to be the primary property of African Americans, were in jeopardy of "takeover" (Blauner, 2000). Although it is safe to say that these events have strained African American-Latino relations, it is more appropriate to say that they have strained race relations across the board. The competition for resources in the lower strata is popularly portrayed as one between blacks and browns, like Chicano and African American street-gangs fighting out a turf war in Los Angeles. But, it is more complicated than that and a lot further reaching (Wilson, 1996; Lim, 2001).

A perpetual newcomer status reinforced by media portrayals of hordes of non-white immigrants coming through a porous border translates into undeserving minorities — illegal aliens — queuing at the public trough with hands extended for the dole. It translates into tax dollars going into educating, feeding, birthing, etc., people who do not belong here and who contribute nothing (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1999). These sentiments are pervasive. There are even Latinos who have publicly expressed them (see Richard Rodriguez's new book, *Brown*). But, these portrayals and sentiments come all too coincidently at a time when there is an overwhelming sentiment, by whites, to dismantle affirmative action-based programs that whites feel are giving unfair advantage to minorities. To be sure, the dominant majority has much to gain by portraying Latinos and Asian Americans as "newcomers" who are jumping way ahead in line to take advantage of affirmative action programs, and succeeding in environments where African American are foundering.

On the other hand, many Latinos and Asian Americans *can* be considered newcomers. However, it is a very touchy and complicated subject in older, established Chicano or Puerto Rican communities, as is evident from the rallying cry, or *grito*, of the Chicano and Boricua movements — *"We are not Foreigners!"*

Many Latino communities, in fact some Latino families, are comprised of third, fourth, and higher order generation people who live with, work, and socialize with people whose arrival to this country is very recent. These relationships represent networks that provide resources for many migrants who can marshal them to create opportunities for themselves and their families (Gold, 2000), similar to the situations described by Stack (1974) in her seminal ethnography that chronicled the relations between people in a poor African American community. The following personal experience is a good way to illustrate how convoluted the question of immigration, as well as how networks evolve, at least for some Latinos:

I am the product of an immigrant father and a native New Mexican mother. My paternal grandfather first made it to Detroit from Mexico in 1916. After much back and forth movement due to the Mexican Revolution, the Great Depression, repatriation, etc., he finally settled his family, once and for all, in Detroit during the early 1930's. By that time, his oldest child had been born and had died in Colorado, second born in Mexico, third born in Detroit, and the fourth also born in Mexico. His relatives have been steadily coming to Detroit since then. Last year marked the most recent arrival from Mexico — which makes my family simultaneously one of the oldest and youngest in that community. To complicate matters, my paternal grandfather's older sister, who is 109 years old, has lived in Detroit continuously since 1921 and is also one of the oldest and newest citizens in the city, as she finally became a U.S. citizen two years ago. Incidentally, she does not (or will not?) speak English.

As a boy, and up until my mid-20's, I worked in an iron fabrication shop alongside a workforce mostly comprised of undocumented men, many from my grandfather's hometown. In 1987 with impending passage of IRCA, these men were forced to "fix their papers." In order to do this they had to prove they worked in the U.S. for several years prior. If they could not prove it, they had two alternatives: 1) buy a work card from a dishonest farm granger, which was expensive and had no guarantee that it would pass muster with the INS; or 2) the quick fix — "borrow" papers from citizens, lie about your identity and continue working until you figure something else out — or get caught. Most of these men had children and needed a quick fix. Consequently, they used a network of Puerto Rican and Chicano friends from whom they could "borrow" papers. As a result of these continuing networks and relationships, many of these men, who still reside in Detroit, willingly help out when my family or I need assistance.

These types of community and family relations complicate simple nativistic or xenophobic attitudes that drive increasing apprehension about diversity and decreasing resources. According to Massey (1998), the new economy has restructured certain labor markets, which were shifted to subcontracting, and created an overabundance of extremely low-paying jobs with no fringe benefits. This is intersected with immigration law that provided a very exploitable workforce and informal work opportunities (pp. 25). So it appears that inner-cities with high migrant populations are re-industrializing. However, the jobs associated with re-industrialization could be characterized as highly exploitative, seasonal, and very undesirable — jobs no one else wants (Moore & Pinderhughes, 1993; Bohon, 2001). At the same time, these intersecting events have created great opportunities for ethnic entrepreneurs to provide cultural fare for growing communities by way of specialty stores, restaurants, etc., but oftentimes their success is dependent on exploiting other ethnics (Gold, 2000).

All told, these indicators suggest that the growing immigrant presence in inner-cities underscores the need to address issues related to the working poor and the informally working — people not currently on the public dole or competing for jobs typically held by African Americans (Lim, 2001).

Shifting A Paradigm:
The Color-line Promises for the Future

Today, there are still clear divisions between certain segments of whites and African Americans in the United States. But, much has changed since W.E.B. DuBois' prophesied that the problem of the 20th Century is "the color-line" (DuBois, 1903, pp.13), including our understanding of race. Structural shifts in our economy have changed, and these shifts promise further change our racial reality. Race and racism, in their present manifestations, are far too complex to analyze and comprehend through a paradigm that a singular color-line suggests. Instead, drastically changing demographics are certainly producing a social revolution wherein secular traditions of doing business, forming alliances, defining family and community, and in generating public choices and policies, will be transformed. Thus, the coming future poses a critical juncture for the nation to convert the current challenges of creating a multi-dimensional national identity that reflects our racial reality into future opportunities.

A dichotomous paradigm implies a distinct division. But, our current socioeconomic flux is characterized by increasing globalization and integration, which implies that our current social spaces increasingly overlap. The opportunities exist here to explore those overlapping social spaces. Instead of focusing on how the overlap is creating conflict over resources and threatening the status quo, perhaps we would benefit by considering the possibility that the increase in the hues and colors of our population might serve to strengthen the struggle against oppressive social structures — perhaps even shift the paradigm to a position that recognizes and valorizes even the least significant of us.

Endnotes

1 As cited in Rosaldo 1993

2 Scholars who cling to the black-white paradigm: Feagin, Hacker, etc.

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