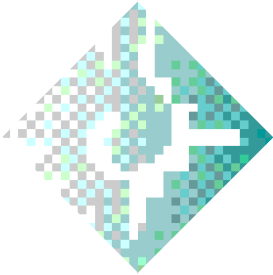


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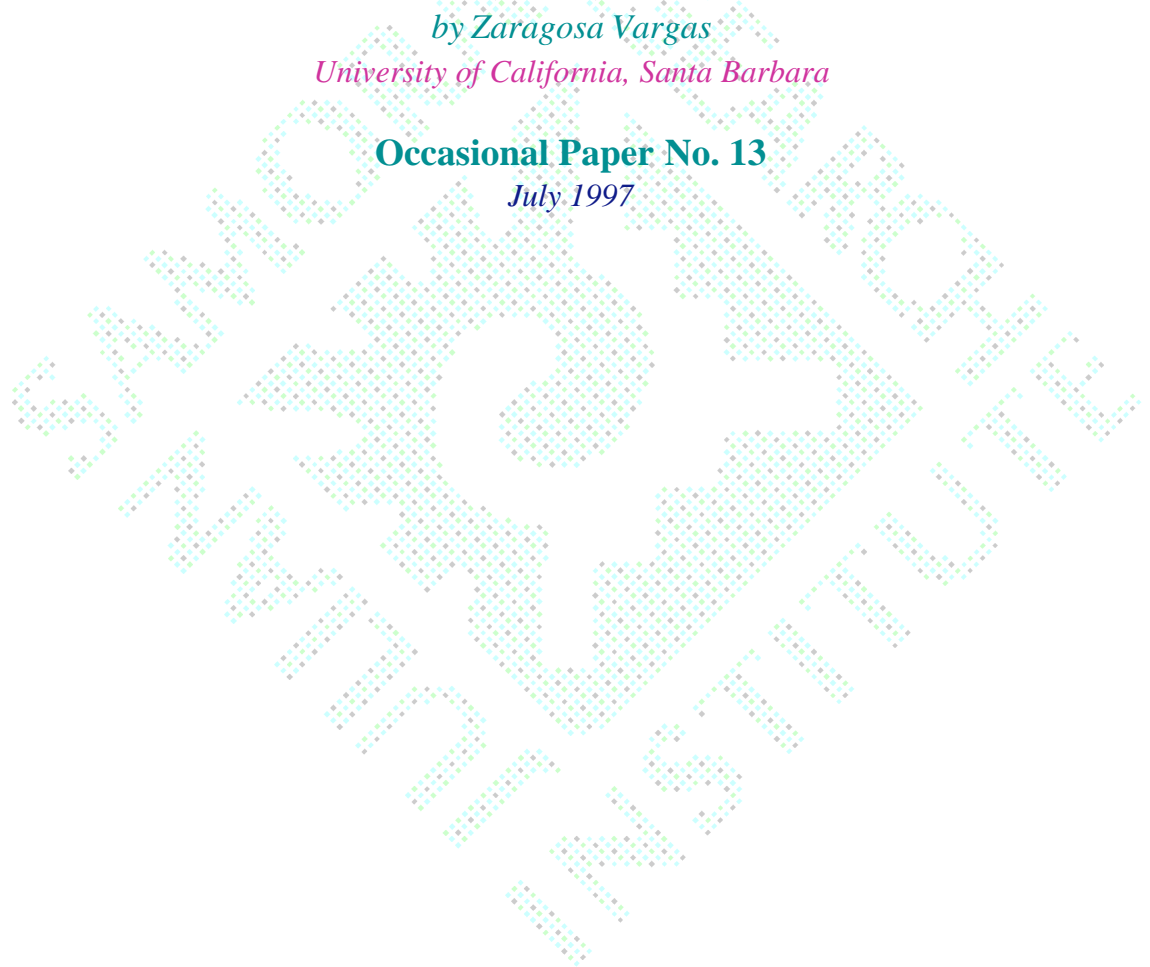
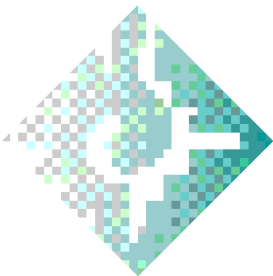
**'Race Matters' and So Does
Ethnicity and Gender:
Ethnic Studies for an
Expanding American Community**

by Zaragosa Vargas

University of California, Santa Barbara

Occasional Paper No. 13

July 1997



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'Race Matters' and So Does Ethnicity and Gender: Ethnic Studies for an Expanding American Community

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Artwork by
Nora Chapa Mendoza, March 1996

The Julian Samora Research Institute is the Midwest's premier policy research and outreach center to the Hispanic community. The Institute's mission includes:

- *Generation of a program of research and evaluation to examine the social, economic, educational, and political condition of Latino communities.*
- *Transmission of research findings to academic institutions, government officials, community leaders, and private sector executives through publications, public policy seminars, workshops, and consultations.*
- *Provision of technical expertise and support to Latino communities in an effort to develop policy responses to local problems.*
- *Development of Latino faculty, including support for the development of curriculum and scholarship for Chicano/Latino Studies.*

‘Race Matters’ and So Does Ethnicity and Gender: Ethnic Studies for an Expanding American Community

Introduction

Since the 1970’s, huge numbers of Latino and Asian immigrants have arrived in the United States for the millions of jobs that have opened up in service, retail, clerical, and light manufacturing. This contemporary wave of immigration from Asia, Mexico, and Latin America has already surpassed in total numbers the immigration from southern and eastern Europe of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. A third of the new immigrants enter the United States through California, America’s new Ellis Island. As a result of this great immigration influx, the population of Los Angeles is one-third foreign born and racial minorities now make up a fourth of California’s population.¹

The increased immigration, along with high birth rates, have made racial minorities the fastest-growing segment of America’s population. One in four of all Americans are members of a racial minority group; in 16 states and the District of Columbia, one in three school children is a minority, and one in five college students are racial minorities. This demographic trend will remain constant into the next century.²

Latinos are defined as Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans and the new arrivals from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and Central and Latin America. As a total group, they are America’s fastest growing minority population. Since 1980, the number of Latinos in the United States has increased by 50%. Presently, over 25 million Latinos live in the United States. Through high birth rates and immigration, Latinos are projected to surpass African Americans as America’s largest racial minority population. Not only are Latinos changing America racially and ethnically, but in terms of language the United States now has the fifth largest Spanish-speaking population in the world. This fast population growth has spawned predominantly Latino cities in America. For example, Los Angeles has the second largest population of Mexicans in the world; Houston, Texas has the world’s third largest Mexican population; followed by Chicago, where one-fourth of the world’s Mexican population reside; and both New York City and Miami have sizable Latino populations.³

Racial Intolerance

The Latinization of America’s largest cities comes in the wake of huge reductions in state and federal aid to housing, schools, health, and job training programs first implemented in the early Reagan years. For Latinos as well as other racial minorities, the economic dislocation of the last quarter-century has intensified racial intolerance. On a daily basis, people of color confront the social ills of joblessness, poor education, and a legal system that punishes rather than providing fairness. Latin American and Asian immigrants have encountered a resurgence of xenophobia as a result of widening racial and class divisions. This nativism is not new; it emerged in the mid-19th Century with the arrival of Irish immigrants, in the late nineteenth century with the completion of the rail lines to the West Coast, when the Chinese immigrant track workers were no longer needed, and again in the early twentieth century when immigration from southern and eastern Europe reached its peak. The passage of Proposition 187, the California Civil Rights Initiative, the anti-immigration legislation currently before congress, and the rise of hate crimes all are recent examples that America is reneging on its commitment to achieve full participation for its racial minorities. Because of American society’s rapid demographic change, the issue of multiculturalism with regard to the true nature of American society has gained considerable resonance and importance.⁴

“Political Correctness”

From the beginning, America has always been a racially diverse nation. This fact and its implications for the need for a more culturally diverse curriculum in higher education can not be readily dismissed. However, the multicultural curriculum has been indicted as both “un-American” and heretical. As a result of resistance to cultural diversity, the curriculum is not being broadened. At stake are the incorporation of an inclusive history in the curriculum and in textbooks, a racially diverse faculty and student population in colleges and universities, and the tolerance for differences on the campus.⁵

In 1963, on the eve of the civil rights movement, the African-American novelist James Baldwin warned: “you must understand that the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, which is operating not only in the classroom, but in society, you will meet the most fantastic... and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending that this won’t happen.” Today, calls for change have produced a steadfast resistance by opponents, many who are well-funded by private think tanks or have the support of conservative elements of the press. Many faculty who dismiss multiculturalism do so on the spurious claim that it is biased. For them, and many other faculty, acceptance of a multicultural curriculum is further obstructed by the fact that this work has been produced by minorities (and women). Multiculturalism is not the sole focus of these attacks. Feminism, gay and lesbian studies, postmodernism, social and labor history, cultural studies, and bilingualism are likewise the targets of this inquisitorial wrath.⁶

According to Historian Lawrence Levine, conservative scholars accuse the proponents of multiculturalism of substituting “ethnic cheer leading” and “voguish nonsense” for scholarship, that in the classroom they engage in “social and psychological therapy” instead of teaching history. As Alan Singer notes, the more vocal opponents of multiculturalism have called on universities to “weed out curricular nonsense, restore free speech, and revive standards,” and they have called for the “defeat [PC] terrorism... by unleashing counterterrorism against cowardly administrators and their complicit faculty.”⁷

However, those making the accusations of the “politicization of the curriculum” and “political correctness” suffer from social amnesia — they fail to remember that until recently minority and women scholars and their views had been excluded on political grounds. Moreover, the most ardent critics of multiculturalism have not conducted research to expose the alleged errors and inaccuracies in the multicultural curriculum, nor have complete and more valid hypotheses been posited by these critics as alternatives to this revisionism. Most of the parsimonious disputes about multiculturalism are empty rhetoric. It does not contribute whatsoever to constructive debate about history, does not weigh the

merit and worth of different genres of art and literature, nor does it propose ways by which this work can be taught in the classroom. The public debate about multiculturalism is a political debate, at times intense and mean-spirited. The burning issue is who in the end will determine education policy and gain claim to both the “true history of America” and of the world.⁸

But all the fuss over “political correctness” obscures the following facts. The frequency of racially motivated attacks and harassment 10 years ago spurred 200 colleges to adopt codes of behavior and speech and that promote racial harmony.⁹ But very few institutions of higher learning have incorporated the experiences of racial minorities and women into their curriculum. Minorities and women still represent a small fraction of college and university faculty.

The attacks on multiculturalism conveniently ignore the vetoes on civil rights legislation, the recent dismantling of affirmative action, and the fact that racism underlines much of America’s history. Poverty rates among African-Americans and Latinos is on the rise. Government assistance programs have been cut back and the current minimum wage can not provide an adequate living standard. When inflation is factored into the minimum wage, nearly one-fifth of American workers with full-time jobs earn poverty-level wages. The American worker could not keep a family of four out of poverty. The decline in social services combined with the absence of good paying jobs has hit female-headed households the hardest, especially in minority populations. In the last 25 years, the number of American children living in poverty has increased 50% and the number of children who grow up poor continues to rise. Endemic poverty has brought greater misery and want for America’s minorities.

An apartheid in public education is likewise on the rise in America. Most African-American and Latino high school students attend schools where minorities account for nine out of 10 students enrolled. One in eight Latinos does not finish the fifth grade and only one in 11 Latinos complete four years of college. Despite the big Spanish-speaking populations in the Southwest, lack of education has worsened the economic and social gulf that divides Anglos from Chicanos.

Rejection by schools and other mainstream institutions fueled the rage and desperation of young racial minorities in the 1980's. The rampant poverty and social anomie contributed to an awful surge of crime and violence, especially gang-related violence, among urban black and Latino youth. Hard drugs, especially inexpensive "crack" cocaine, flooded ghettos and barrios and became the leading cause of violence. Rather than a bright future, inner-city youth faced either prison or death. As the 1980's ended, homicide was the leading cause of death among young adult black males.

Prisons are now one of America's growth industries. Our elected officials continue to pour large sums of shrinking federal moneys into the construction of new jails and prisons, which has allowed for the doubling of America's population of incarcerated inmates. By 1990, America led all industrialized nations in the ratio of prisoners to the general population. America still holds this ignominious distinction. Affirmative action apparently is working in prison. Half of the one million men incarcerated in prisons are people of color, while one in four death-row prisoners are African-Americans.¹⁰

The immiseration of America is undermining our cherished beliefs and expectations about democracy, founded on the principles of opportunity, equality, and community. As Cornel West of Harvard University remarked, for young urban African-American men facing unemployment rates of 65% their prospect is for lives of "horrifying meaninglessness" and hopelessness. The critics of multiculturalism are wrong to assert that the fragmentation of America is the result of multiculturalism. On the contrary, multiculturalism mediates America's ongoing fragmentation along racial and ethnic lines.¹¹

Ethnic Studies

The goals of multiculturalism are to establish democratic pluralism among faculty, on campus, in the classroom and in curriculum and to diversify intellectual debate. Ethnic studies programs vary at each college and university; however, a comparative approach to the study of the minority experience is the fabric that binds the discipline. This comparative approach is made within the context of race, class, and gender. Scholars no longer cast history as a one-dimensional dichotomy of oppressors and victims.

Historical agency is a key factor of the ethnic studies curriculum. Ethnic studies historians view the experiences of people of color as active agents engaged in the making of their own history. It is a nonessentialist analysis of the nation's historical past. Multiculturalism is an inclusive discipline that engages students in the study of history. It relates their respective identities to the larger American identity. Students learn to appreciate "who built America" — Irish canal builders, women mill workers, Chinese railroad workers, Jewish garment workers, and enslaved African-American field workers.¹²

As one of the assigned workshop readings notes, excellent scholarship about and by racial minorities and women is creating new constructs about race, gender, class, and sexuality that challenge the existing curriculums. The "new" western history has begun to disclose the multicultural beginnings of places like California. Feminist scholars have sought to create a new synthesis of men's and women's history by exploring the ways men's and women's worlds, experiences, and cultures intersected. Research about women is vital. Scholars concerned with breaking down the divide between history and "herstory" has led to a new interest in gender relations. Chicana scholars are expanding the category "woman" to include the experiences of a wide range of women. Chicana scholars like my compañeras Antonio Casteñada, Deena González, and Vicki Ruiz are providing new insights into how such categories as race, class, and gender have intersected. Recognition of differences might be used to multiply the sources of resistance (by the Chicano people, both men and women) to particular forms of domination. In the coming years, the best history will be produced by the growing number of Chicana historians.¹³

A multicultural perspective requires dialogue, research, analysis, discussion, and experimentation utilizing a multidisciplinary outlook. As previously noted, multiculturalism is about human agency because it contextualizes and centers people's experiences in history. It calls for active participation by students in the learning process so that they can appreciate how history can become a key in examining the past so that better understanding of the present is realized. This way, students become informed and active participants in shaping America as its future citizens.¹⁴

The nation's colleges and universities are changing dramatically as the United States is becoming more and more culturally and ethnically diverse. In this tumultuous period of englobalization it is imperative for teachers and students to know and understand racial and ethnic differences at home and abroad. A problem of significant importance which we must address is the bifurcation of American society because of growing class divisions. I want to emphasize that affirmative action is not the only goal of multiculturalism, for multiculturalism is also about making change. The task is to create and encourage diversity and difference and at the same time promote debate and discussion to generate new ideas.¹⁵

Conclusion

The growing presence of minorities is reshaping America for the next century. By the end of the 1990's, a third of the total United States population will consist of people of color; within 70 years one in two Americans will be a racial minority. This process of demographic and cultural transformation will force us to rethink who constitute the "real Americans". Berkeley professor Ronald Takaki notes in his book *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* that "America's dilemma has been our resistance to ourselves — our denial of our immensely varied selves. But we have nothing to fear but fear of our own diversity." Thus in terms of its past, America must reexamine its history to incorporate the varied experiences of racial minorities. The American nation-building process is ever constant. Earlier versions of America's history must be changed to reflect the reality of racial diversity. All of us are cast as actors on the stage of American history. It is we who determine the course of American society.¹⁶

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