

Negotiating Different Racial Topographies: Living in Color, Seeing Black and White

Manning Marable compares race to a prism that refracts light, bending it into wavelengths that appear as color overlaying the contours of what we see.¹ At the same time, race in America is commonly discussed in polarized terms of darkness and light. In 1944, Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal referred to the contradiction between American liberal ideals and the poor economic status of African Americans as the “American dilemma,” indicating the primacy of Black/White relations to American history. Despite multicultural roots and demographics, a Black/White paradigm often governs official recognition of race in America.² The Paradigm traditionally assigns “race” only to African Americans, who are recognized objects of racism.

Factors impinging on the adequacy of the Black/White paradigm of how racial categories are lived and defined include: (1) de-industrialization and the “global restructuring” of capitalism that involves redistribution of capital and labor across national borders in the efficient pursuit of two strategies of profit accumulation (cheap labor and technological innovation); (2) retrenchment of the social welfare state; and (3) dominance of a conservative ideology that among other things, blames individuals for their extrusion from the wage economy. Global restructuring has contributed to large-scale immigration of unprecedented diversity.³ This immigration has a large Latino/a and Asian American component that is bifurcated along class lines to reflect the economy’s need for both workers in the low wage sector and highly skilled workers such as engineers and doctors. Migration is also enlarged and diversified by refugees forced from their homelands in ways the typical immigration narrative obscures.

Scholars and social activists argue that alternatives to the Black/White paradigm are needed to account for changing experiences of race and racism.⁴ In addition to color, anti-Asian and anti-Latino racism can incorporate factors such as language and citizenship. People of color, however, share stakes in areas where

¹ Manning Marable, *Beyond Black and White: Transforming African-American Politics* (New York: Verso, 1995). “Race” in America is a fundamental part of how we process our social environment, understand our relationships to each other, and think about our own identity. On an individual level, interpreting race is largely unconscious and involves linking our perception of how society organizes the distribution of cultural, economic, and political privileges and disadvantages to physical signs of “difference” that we detect on the body, face, and even in patterns of speech, dress, hairstyle, class, and geographic location. Race is not only in our minds, but also appears explicitly in laws and in unwritten codes of behavior that affect social, educational, and political institutions.

² Major landmarks of institutional racism targeting African Americans include slavery, black codes, and Jim Crow laws. A “paradigm” is associated with meta-theoretical and ontological assumptions, meaning that it affects not only our interpretations of a phenomenal world outside of our minds, but that it also guides what we perceive “reality” itself to be. Racial paradigms offer a theory of how race works—its primary agents and institutional structures.

³ Racial restrictions written into immigration and naturalization law between 1882 and 1952 prohibited immigration from many countries designated as “Asian.”

⁴ As an interpretation of American history, the Black/White paradigm evacuates indigenous people from the Americas and obscures the political struggles of First Nation peoples that are organized around sovereignty, land, and specific treaty rights rather than civil rights. The paradigm also contributes to distorted portrayals of Chicanos and Asian Americans as “new” to America even though the United States annexed half of Mexico a little over 150 years ago, and various “Asians” have moved along trade and labor routes under the influence of European travelers, merchants, and colonists since the seventeenth century.

discrimination occurs including employment, housing, schools, healthcare, and social services. The Black/White paradigm combined with conservative racist ideology exacerbates tension over issues such as affirmative action and bilingual education. Class bifurcation and nativism confuse immigrants' status as people of color: Are they privileged recipients of government and private sector solicitude? Why do so many have jobs when underprivileged Americans are unemployed? Are immigrants "White," meaning do they have privileges of mobility and rights historically associated with whiteness in the United States? Or are they "Black"—sharing the needs and concerns of racial minorities?

In the immigration of the last forty years we see more than a demographic body count, but also a map of America's foreign relations, the geographical span of its global military involvement, and the places across the world where American corporations invest money and draw resources including labor. Crossing national borders into the United States means entering a multiculturally-rooted society paradigmatically structured in Black and White. Democracy and social justice hinge on recognizing the relevance of the Black/White paradigm and adopting a new racial vision forged in painful and difficult interracial conflicts and coalitions, fractured through a prism into color rather than shaded in black and white.

Further Reading: A number of scholars in multiple disciplinary fields have critiqued and analyzed the Black/White paradigm in education, communication, history, law, and American politics. Here are some lists of places to begin reading.

Blackwell, Angela Glover, Stewart Kwoh, and Manuel Pastor. *Searching for the Uncommon Common Ground: New Dimensions on Race in America*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2002.

Goldfield, Michael. *The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics*. New York: The New Press, 1997.

Jennings, James. *Blacks, Latinos, and Asians in Urban America: Status and Prospects for Politics and Activism*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994.

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Miles, Jack. "Blacks vs. Browns: African Americans and Latinos." *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1992, 41.

Myrdal, Gunnar. *American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. New York: Harper, 1944.

Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*. 2d ed. New York: Routledge, 1994

Ong, Paul, Edna Bonacich, and Lucie Cheng. "The Political Economy of Capitalist Restructuring and the New Asian Immigration." In *New Asian Immigration to Los Angeles and Global Restructuring*, edited by Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich, and Lucie Cheng, 3-35. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.

Seller, Maxine and Louis Weis, eds. *Beyond Black and White: New Faces and Voices in U.S. Schools*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.

Torres, Rodolfo D., and ChorSwang Ngin. "Racialized Boundaries, Class Relations, and Cultural Politics: The Asian-American and Latino Experience." In *Culture and Difference: Critical Perspectives on the Bicultural Experience in the United States*, edited by Antonia Darder, 55-69. New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1995.

Wu, Frank. *Yellow: Race in American Beyond Black and White*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

Multiculturalism in Los Angeles: Los Angeles is often cited as a city whose demography and economic structure best illustrate some of the changes taking place in the racial dynamic of other urban and rural cities across the country.

Davis, Mike. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. London: Verso, 1992.

Kim, Elaine, "Home is Where the *Han* Is." In *Asian American Studies: A Reader*, edited by Jean Yu-wen Shuen Wu and Min Song, 270-289. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

Kim, Kwang Chung, ed. *Koreans in the Hood: Conflict with African Americans*.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Pastor, Manuel, Jr., Lisa Magana, Amalia Cabezas, and Morgan Appel. *Latinos and the*

Los Angeles Uprising: The Economic Context. Claremont, Calif.: Tomas Rivera Center, 1993.

Reiff, David. *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991.

Law and Critical Race Theory: Race in general and Black and White identity have been clearly codified into the law, making it a straightforward place to detect institutional evidence of the Paradigm.

Ancheta, Angelo. *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

Crenshaw, Kimberle, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, eds. *Critical Race*

Theory : The Key Writings that Formed the Movement. New York : New Press, 1995.

Delgado, Richard. "The Black/White Binary: How Does it Work?" *In The Latino/a Condition: A Critical Reader*, edited by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, 369-375. New York: New York University Press,

Delgado, Richard and Jean Stefancic, eds. *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000.

Gotanda, Neil. "Exclusion and Inclusion: Immigration and American Orientalism." *In*

Across the Pacific: Asian Americans and Globalization, edited by Evelyn Hu-DeHart, 129-151. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000.

Haney-Lopez, Ian. *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.

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American Indian and Pacific Islander Resources: Narratives of the United States as a Black/White nation and a nation of immigrants often obscure the history, politics, and racial status of American Indians and Pacific Islanders.

Deloria, Vine Jr. and Clifford M. Lytle. *The Nations Within: The Past and Future of American Indian Sovereignty*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.

Trask, Huanani Kay. *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawaii*. Monroe, Me. : Common Courage Press, 1993.

Wilkins, David E. *American Indian Politics and the American Political System*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002.

Indian Health Service: <http://www.ihs.gov/>

American Indian Research and Policy Institute: <http://www.airpi.org>

National Congress of American Indians: <http://www.ncai.org/>

Native American Environmental, Legal, and Educational Links:
<http://www.colorado.edu/law/Wilkinson/indlinkpage.htm>