

“IT WASN’T ME!”: HOW WILL RACE AND RACISM WORK IN 21st CENTURY AMERICA

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Tyrone A. Forman,
Amanda E. Lewis and David G. Embrick

ABSTRACT

In post-civil rights America, most whites believe the nation is “beyond race.” If confronted with the reality of racial inequality, they proclaim they have nothing to do with it (“It wasn’t me”). Our goals in this paper are twofold. First, we suggest whites’ new common sense reflects a new, more subtle racial ideology: the ideology of color blind racism. We use data from the 1997 Survey of Social Attitudes of College Students and the 1998 Detroit Area Study to document the central frames of this ideology and examine how most whites use them to explain a variety of racial matters. Second, we argue that racial stratification in the United States is becoming Latin America-like. Specifically, we contend racial stratification is becoming tri-racial with a pigmentocratic component to it and that the ideology of color blind racism will bolster this trend. We use a variety of data to test on a preliminary basis our thesis. We conclude examining the implications of this new ideology and racial stratification system for the future of race relations in this country.

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INTRODUCTION

In the popular song by Jamaican reggae singer Shaggy,¹ the main character has just been caught by his girlfriend having sex with another woman in his house. His friend advises him to lie and tell his girlfriend, "It wasn't me." Much like the male character in the song, white America responds with a collective "It wasn't me" when it comes to issues of racial inequality. However, unlike the male character in the song, whites are not being duplicitous when they say "It wasn't me" as they truly believe they have nothing to do with racial minorities' standing in society. For instance, in a recent nationwide survey in which whites were asked to explain the disadvantaged status of blacks vis-à-vis whites, 66% thought it was because blacks rely too much on welfare and another 62% thought that blacks lacked the motivation to improve their socioeconomic status (Smith, 1998). In the 2000 General Social Survey, 51% of whites stated that blacks' low social position was due to lack of motivation and willpower and only 33% thought it was because of discrimination. A 1996 survey revealed that if pressed to choose between a structural explanation (e.g. "racial discrimination is the main reason why many black people can't get ahead these days") and an individual explanation (e.g. "blacks who can't get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition"), whites are more likely to cite personal responsibility over racial discrimination by a 2-to-1 margin (58% said personal responsibility and 28% said discrimination) (Smith, 1998). In fact, a quarter century of trend data indicates that individual explanations have surpassed structural explanations for understanding the condition of blacks. For instance, in 1972, approximately three-quarters of whites (72%) attributed black disadvantage to "generations of slavery and discrimination." By 2000, less than half of whites were willing to make such an attribution (47%) (2000 General Social Survey).

Another example of this mainstream² viewpoint is expressed in interviews where whites often go so far as to deny minority claims of discrimination suggesting that such "attitudes" are unhelpful, un-American, or even racist. For instance, in one interview with a suburban mother (Lewis, forthcoming), she stated the following:

Mrs. Miller: I do get annoyed, when I see all of these Black family TV shows on TV. I have to say that. There's one of these stations that has a lot of those. And I do get annoyed, I don't like to watch them. It just – it just bothers me the, the portrayal I guess, of it.

Amanda: Which part of it?

Mrs. Miller: Maybe that, maybe the hints they might make against the white people. Or . . . I don't like the corny attitude. I just – that kind of stuff. I'm very strongly into we're in America, now be an American.

Another respondent suggested the real problem for blacks is their “chip on the shoulder” attitude:

There is a certain amount of that racism that I feel like is, brought on by the groups themselves, and not by the outside group. Because, there's a certain amount of kind of “chip on their shoulder” attitude, that they kinda carry around with them, whomever they meet. And it, it is apparent to whomever they meet, and it turns you off. And that doesn't help the Black image – (laughs). It doesn't help – it doesn't help their case, if they're try – if, if you know, we're all trying to work together – for them to always [be] using that as an excuse constantly.

Thus, whites can use the “it wasn't me” stance not only to deny responsibility, but to suggest that alternative perspectives are the “real” problem (see also Blauner, 1989; Rubin, 1994). Our goals in this paper are to explain whites' “It wasn't me” post-civil rights viewpoint and predict how “race relations” (more properly, racial stratification) will operate in the 21st century. To accomplish our goals, we first explore “color blind racism” or the ideology that has emerged to justify contemporary racial inequality and which produces the “it wasn't me” stance. Secondly, we look to the future and argue that race relations in the United States will become Latin America-like and provide some evidence to support our claim.

COLOR BLIND RACISM: HOW WHITES JUSTIFY CONTEMPORARY RACIAL INEQUALITY

Whites' post-civil rights “common sense” on racial matters is that racists are few and far between, that discrimination has all but disappeared since the 1960s, and that most whites are color blind (see Lewis, 2001; Lewis, Chesler & Forman, 2000). Although whites' common sense is not totally without foundation (e.g. traditional forms of racial discrimination and exclusion as well as Jim Crow-based racist beliefs have decreased in significance), we argue that it is ultimately false. In this section we contend that a new powerful racial ideology³ has emerged to justify the contemporary racial order: the ideology of color blind racism. This ideology, unlike Jim Crow racism, is anchored on the abstract extension of egalitarian values to racial minorities and the notion that racial minorities are culturally deficient (see also Bobo et al., 1997; Essed, 1996). Furthermore, this ideology fits the subtle, institutional, and apparently non-racial character of the “new racism” (Bonilla-Silva & Lewis, 1999) or America's post-civil rights racial structure⁴ (see also Brooks, 1990; Smith, 1995).

Yet, color blind racism is a curious racial ideology. Although it engages, as all ideologies do, in “blaming the victim,” it does so in a very indirect, “now you see it, now you don't” style. In this section we examine its central frames⁵ and explain

how whites use them in ways that justify racial inequality. The quotes in this section come from two similarly structured projects: the *1997 Survey of Social Attitudes of College Students* and *1998 Detroit Area Study* (DAS henceforth). The former is a convenience sample of 627 college students (451 white students) surveyed at a large Midwestern University (MU), a large Southern University (SU), and a medium-sized West Coast University (WU). A 10% random sample of the white students who provided information in the survey on how to contact them (about 90%) were interviewed (41 students, 17 men and 24 women, 31 from middle and upper middle class backgrounds and 10 from the working class) (for more information see Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). The 1998 DAS is a probability survey of 400 black and white Detroit metropolitan area residents (323 whites and 67 blacks). The response rate was an acceptable 67.5%. As part of this study, 84 respondents (a 21% sub-sample) were randomly selected for in-depth interviews (67 whites and 17 blacks).

The interviews were conducted by research assistants who followed a structured interview protocol, were race-matched, and lasted between one and two hours. Research assistants transcribed the material verbatim and the principal investigator for both projects did a content analysis of the interviews to determine broad themes and recurrent discursive rhetorical elements. In this paper, we perform ideological analysis, and hence, we assess if respondents used similar themes and arguments rather than trying to characterize individual respondents' views (against or for integration, interracial marriage, or affirmative action). This strategy limits the likelihood of biased interpretations of respondents' positions on issues or false attributions of intentions to respondents.

Our analysis revealed that color blind racism has four central frames. The four frames are *abstract liberalism*, *naturalization*, *cultural racism*, and *minimization of racism*. We provide examples of how these frames are used by whites to defend, explain, and ultimately justify contemporary racial inequality.

Abstract Liberalism: Unmasking Reasonable Racism

When minorities were slaves, contract laborers, or "braceros"⁶ the principles of liberalism and humanism were not extended to them. In the apt words of philosopher Charles W. Mills (1997, p. 27), "*European humanism usually meant that only Europeans were human*" (emphasis in original). Today most whites believe minorities are part of the body politic but extend the ideas associated with liberalism in an *abstract* and *decontextualized* manner that ends up rationalizing racially unfair situations. For example, most whites claim to be for equal opportunity in principle, but oppose any race-based program (affirmative action, busing, etc.) to help

minorities. In their protestations, as we will show, they exhibit little concern for the fact that discrimination is alive and well and imposes limitations on minorities' life chances.

Because of the curious way in which liberalism's principles are used in the post-civil rights era, other analysts label modern racial ideology "laissez faire racism" (Bobo, Kluegel & Smith, 1997) or "competitive racism" (Essed, 1996) or argue that modern racism is essentially a combination of the "American Creed" with antiblack prejudice (Sears, 1988). The importance of the abstract liberalism frame is evident in that whites use it on a host of issues ranging from affirmative action and interracial friendship and marriage to residential and school segregation. Because of the pivotal role played by this frame in organizing whites' racial views, we provide three examples of how whites use it. An archetype of how whites use the notion of equal opportunity in an abstract manner to oppose racial fairness is Sue, a student at SU. When asked if minority students should be provided unique opportunities to be admitted into universities, Sue stated:

I don't think that they should be provided with unique opportunities. I think that they should have the same opportunities as everyone else. You know, it's up to them to meet the standards and whatever that's required for entrance into universities or whatever. I don't think that just because they're a minority that they should, you know, not meet the requirements, you know.

Sue, like most whites, ignores the effects of past and contemporary discrimination on the social, economic, and educational status of minorities. Therefore, by supporting equal opportunity for everyone without a concern for the existing savage racial inequalities between whites and blacks, Sue's stance safeguards white privilege.

College students are not the only ones who use this abstract notion of equal opportunity to justify their racial views. For example, Eric, a corporate auditor in his forties and a very affable man who seemed more tolerant than most members of his generation (e.g. he had dated a black woman for three years, acknowledged that discrimination happens "a lot" and identified multiple examples, and even said that "the system is . . . is white"), erupted in anger when asked if reparations were due to blacks for the injuries caused by slavery and Jim Crow.

[In a loud and angry tone] Oh tell them to shut up, ok! I had nothing to do with the whole situation. The opportunity is there, there is no reparation involved and let's not dwell on it. I'm very opinionated about that!

Was Eric just a white with a "principled opposition" to government intervention? This does not seem to be the case since Eric, like most whites, made a distinction between government spending on behalf of victims of child abuse, the homeless, and battered women (whom most whites deem as legitimate candidates for

assistance) and government spending on blacks (whom most whites deem as unworthy candidates for assistance).

This finding was consistent with DAS survey results. For instance, whereas 64% of whites agreed that “we should expand the services that benefit the poor,” only 40% (84% of blacks) agreed with the proposition “the government should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks living in the United States.” But was their opposition “racial” or just based on their opposition to government intervention in general? It seems to be racial as the proportion of whites supporting government programs that were not perceived as “racial” was quite large. For example, 75% approved of increasing federal spending for the environment and 60% for social security, however only 32% approved of such increases for programs to assist blacks.

This frame appeared occasionally in discussions on affirmative action, but most often in discussions about the limited level of school and residential integration in America. College students and older adults were adamant in arguing that it is not the government’s business to remedy racial problems. For example, Ian, a manager of information security at an automotive company in his forties, used the abstract liberalism frame in response to the question on the limited level of school integration. Although Ian’s first reaction was to question the premise of the question (“I guess I don’t believe that”), he later addressed the issue of who is to blame by saying the following:

I don’t think I can’t put the blame on anybody, not the government. We can’t force blacks to move out to Nebraska or Utah or whatever to live. Same thing, you can’t make ‘em move to the upper peninsula and move to just because you want to have blacks in school. Um, some of it may be partially due to blacks themselves. They don’t want to move to certain areas, they are happy with where they’re at.

When asked directly if the government should do anything to ameliorate school segregation, Ian reiterated,

I don’t think the government should really play any part in it. If blacks want to stay in Detroit or any other area and continue that pattern, that’s fine. If they want to move out to the suburbs and enroll their kid, more power to ‘em, go for it! But I don’t think there should be any forced integration.

Naturalization: Decoding the Meaning of “That’s the way it is”

A frame that has not yet been brought to the fore by social scientists is whites’ naturalization of race-related matters. Approximately half of DAS respondents and college students used this frame, particularly when discussing school or neighborhood matters or to explain the limited contact between whites and minorities or even whites’ preference for whites as significant others. The word “natural” or

the phrase “that’s the way it is” is often interjected to normalize events or actions that could otherwise be interpreted as racially motivated (residential segregation) or racist (preference for whites as friends and partners). But, as social scientists know quite well, few things that happen in the social world are “natural,” particularly those pertaining to racial matters. Segregation as well as racial preferences is produced through social processes.

One example of how whites insert this frame is Bill, a manager in a manufacturing firm. He explained the limited level of school integration as follows:

I don’t think it’s anybody’s fault. Because people tend to group with their own people. Whether it’s white or black or upper-middle class or lower class or, you know, upper class, you know, Asians. People tend to group with their own. Doesn’t mean if a black person moves into your neighborhood, they shouldn’t go to your school. They should and you should mix and welcome them and everything else, but you can’t force people together. If people want to be together, they should intermix more. [Interviewer: OK. So the lack of mixing is really just kind of an individual lack of desire?] Well, individuals, it’s just the way it is. You know, people group together for lots of different reasons: social, religious. Just as animals in the wild, you know. Elephants group together, cheetahs group together. You bus a cheetah into an elephant herd because they should mix? You can’t force that [laughs].

Bill’s metaphor comparing racial segregation to the separation of species, however, was not the only way of using the naturalization frame. For example, Jim, a 30-year old computer software salesperson for a large company, naturalized school segregation as follows:

Ah, you know, it’s more of the human nature’s fault. It’s not the government’s fault, right? The government doesn’t tell people where to live. So as people decide where to live or where to move into or where they wanna feel comfortable, [they] move to where they feel comfortable. We all kinda hang out with people that are like us. I mean, you look at Detroit, we have a Mexican village, why do we have a Mexican village? Why aren’t Mexican people spread out all over on metro Detroit? Well, they like being near other Mexican people that way they could have a store that suited them close by the, you know, those sort of things probably together. So, it’s more human nature that I would blame for it.

These narratives are noteworthy not only for the way they explain racial patterns but also for the implicit solutions they suggest. That is, nothing needs to be done, thus justifying the status quo and clearly implying that no intervention is necessary.

“They Don’t Have It Altogether”: Cultural Racism

Pierre Andr  Taguieff (1990) has argued that modern European racism does not rely on an essentialist interpretation of minorities’ endowments. Instead, it has *biologized* (presented them as if they were fixed) their presumed cultural practices and used that as the rationale for justifying racial inequality. Thus, Europeans are less likely today to claim that minorities are biologically inferior

(i.e. less intelligent, capable, or moral) but Europeans are quick to argue that their culture is “different” (inferior) and the reason for their secondary status in society (Taguieff, 2001). By treating culture as immutable, Europeans deflect any possible accusation of racism (“It is not our fault that they live and behave like that”) and can blame minorities for their social status (“If you guys work hard and complain less, you would be able to achieve parity with us”).

This cultural racism is very well established in America (Feagin, 2000). Originally labeled as the “culture of poverty” in the 1960s, this tradition has resurfaced many times since in new flesh resurrected by conservative scholars such as Charles Murray (1984) and Lawrence Mead (1986). Even liberals, such as William Julius Wilson (1987), and radicals, such as Cornel West (1993), devote too much attention to blacks’ cultural practices and come close to make them independent of the structure that promotes them.⁷ The essence of the American version of this frame is “blaming the victim,” arguing that minorities’ standing is a product of their lack of effort, loose family organization, and inappropriate or deficient values.

Since there is very little disagreement among social scientists about the centrality of this frame in the post-civil rights era, we provide only one example of how whites use this frame. Kim, a student at MU, agreed with the premise of the following question, “Many whites explain the status of blacks in this country as a result of blacks lacking motivation, not having the proper work ethic, or being lazy. What do you think?”

Yeah, I totally agree with that. I don’t think, you know, they’re all like that, but, I mean, it’s just that if it wasn’t that way, why would there be so many blacks living in the projects? You know, why would there be so many poor blacks? If they worked hard, they could make it just as high as anyone else could. You know, I just think that’s just, you know, they’re raised that way and they see that parents are so they assume that’s the way it should be. And they just follow the roles their parents had for them and don’t go anywhere.

Minimization of Racism: Whites’ Declining Significance of Race Thesis

When whites are asked about discrimination in the abstract, they acknowledge its existence. For example, when DAS respondents were asked the question, “Discrimination against blacks is no longer a problem in the United States,” a high proportion of *both* blacks and whites (83% of whites and 90% of blacks) “disagreed” with that statement. Nevertheless, whites and blacks disagree about the centrality of discrimination in explaining blacks’ collective standing. Hence in response to the more specific question, “Blacks are in the position that they are today as a group because of present day discrimination,” only 33% of whites “agreed” with that statement (compared to 61% of blacks).

College students were more likely than DAS respondents to give at least surface support to the idea of the continuing existence of discrimination. Because students interviewed for this study were enrolled in social science courses at the time of the interviews, they may have become sensitized to the significance of discrimination as well as to the new character of contemporary discrimination. However, despite this exposure, few believed discrimination and institutionalized racism are the reason why blacks lag behind whites in this society. In general, all respondents articulated their declining significance of race thesis in one of two ways. Whereas some used an indirect strategy of denial or minimization of discrimination set by one of the following two phrases "I am not black" or "I don't see discrimination" (strategy favored by college students), others denied outright that discrimination happens.

First is Mary, a student at SU who used the indirect strategy of denial. She answered a direct question on whether or not blacks face lots of discrimination as follows:

Well, from my point of view, I don't see it necessarily. But then, of course, I am *white*. And so I'm not going to see it. It's something I'm not looking for. Second, it doesn't happen to me so it's very hard for me to look at a minority person and say "Well, they're facing racism right now" because it is something that is not happening to me, and I'm not looking for it. But I'm *sure* it happens.

This answer sounds reasonable because Mary is not black and thus cannot speak about blacks' experiences. However, Mary seriously doubts discrimination is very prominent in blacks' lives. Moreover, she believes that when it happens, it does to few individuals and in an overt manner. This is illustrated in her response to the statement, "Many blacks and other minorities claim that they do not get access to good jobs because of discrimination and that when they get the jobs they are not promoted at the same speed as their white peers,"

I think before you really start talking about hiring practices and promotion practices, you have to look at credentials. I mean, you know, I've only really had one job. I worked for a general contractor so it was basically me in the office all day with him, my boss. But I, in fact, you have to look at credentials. I mean, I don't know if, you know, a white person gets a job over a minority [and] I can't sit here and say "Well, that's discrimination because I don't know what the factors were. This person got a master's degree versus a bachelor's degree, or more in-depth training than this person, you know? I mean, I definitely do not doubt that [discrimination] happens, that minorities get passed over for promotions and that they are not hired based on their race. I have absolutely no doubt that it happens. I think that before you can sit there and start calling a lot of things discrimination, you need to look into the background, the credentials behind it.

The second example is of respondents who deny discrimination outright. Many of these respondents believe blacks read racism into situations that do not have a

racial basis. Sandra, a retail salesperson in her early forties, is one such case as evident by the way she explained her view on discrimination:

I think if you are looking for discrimination, I think it's there to be *found*. But if you make the best of any situation, and if *you don't use it as an excuse*. I think sometimes it's an excuse because people felt they deserved a job, whatever! I think if things didn't go their way I know a lot of people have tendency to use prejudice or racism or whatever as an *excuse*. I think in some ways, *yes* there is (sic) people who are prejudiced. It's not only blacks, it's about Spanish, or women. In a lot of ways there [is] a lot of *reverse* discrimination. It's just what you wanna make of it.

These frames together form a formidable arsenal of ideas that help *most* whites⁸ justify the racial status quo. For example, when whites are asked about affirmative action, they can resort to the frame of abstract liberalism to oppose it: "Why should we use discrimination to combat discrimination?" or "We should judge people by their merits and let the best person get the job, promotion, or be admitted into a good college." When whites are confronted with the tremendous residential and school segregation in the United States, they argue that race has nothing to do with these matters: "This is a natural thing" or "People prefer to be with people who are like them" or "This has nothing to do with race." When whites are faced with evidence of discrimination, they acknowledge its occurrence but classify the episodes as "isolated incidents" (e.g. the reaction to the lynching of James Byrd in Jasper, Texas). If blacks suggest discrimination is systemic, whites usually blame blacks for playing the "race card." For example, in an interview with a white mother, when asked whether she ever talked to her kids about race-related current events, the mother replied, "I mean maybe Rodney King, because he was kind of playing the Black card, you know, 'It's because I'm Black.'" Even in this rather extreme case, the severe beating of a Black man at the hands of white police officers, this person doubted claims of harm (see Lewis, forthcoming).

If color blind racism is the ideology typical of the "new racism" era (Bonilla-Silva & Lewis, 1999), how will it play out in the future given that the demography of the country is changing so dramatically? More significantly, how will racial stratification be organized in a country where most actors believe that "race does not matter" and where minorities are slowly becoming the majority? We examine these matters in the next section.

"WE ARE ALL AMERICANS": THE LATIN AMERICANIZATION OF RACE RELATIONS IN THE USA

So far, we have discussed the nature of post-civil rights racial ideology. Now we want to outline how we think race relations will operate in the 21st century. The

basic thread of our argument is that race relations will become Latin America-like. Yet, Latin America-like does not mean exactly like Latin America. The 400-year history of the American "racial formation" (Omi & Winant, 1994) has stained the racial stratification order forever. Thus, we expect some important differences in this new American racial stratification system compared to that typical of Latin American societies. First, "shade discrimination" (Kinsbrunner, 1996) will not work perfectly. Hence, for example, although Asian Indians are dark-skinned, they will still be higher in the stratification order than, for example, Mexican American *mestizos*. Second, Middle Easterners, Asian Indians, and other non-Christian groups will not be allowed complete upward mobility. Third, because of the 300 years of dramatic racialization and group formation, most members of the non-white groups will maintain "ethnic" (Puerto Ricans) or racial claims (e.g. blacks) and demand group-based rights.

In becoming Latin America-like, we contend the United States will begin to exhibit the ostrich approach to racial matters of countries such as Cuba, Mexico, or Brazil that stick their head deep into the social ground and say, "We don't have races here. We don't have racism here. We are all Mexicans, Cubans, Brazilians, or Puerto Ricans!" Nevertheless, researchers have documented that racial minorities in these so-called "racial democracies," tend to be worse off than even racial minorities in Western nations. In Brazil, for example, blacks and *pardos* (tan or brown) earn about 40 to 45% as much as whites; are half as likely as whites to be employed in professional jobs, and have virtually no representation in colleges (Hasenbalg & do Ville Silva, 1999; Lovell & Wood, 1998; Nascimento & Nascimento, 2001; Telles, 1999).

Moreover, we argue that the United States will become Latin America-like not just in reference to racial thinking but also with regard to the structure of racial stratification. We suggest that the bi-racial system typical of the United States (white versus nonwhite) – which was the exception in the world-racial system⁹ – will evolve into a more complex racial stratification system. Like in many Latin America countries, we posit the United States will develop a tri-racial system¹⁰ with "whites" at the top, an intermediary group of "honorary whites" – similar to the coloreds in South Africa during formal apartheid – and a non-white group or the "collective black"¹¹ at the bottom. Furthermore, we contend this system will be further complicated by a pigmentocratic component – the ranking of individuals based on skin tone, facial characteristics, and hair texture, that is, individual members of racial and ethnic groups will also rank themselves *within* groups based on phenotype broadly construed.

As we suggest in Fig. 1, which is a heuristic rather than an analytical device,¹² the "white" group will include groups such as "traditional" whites, new "white"

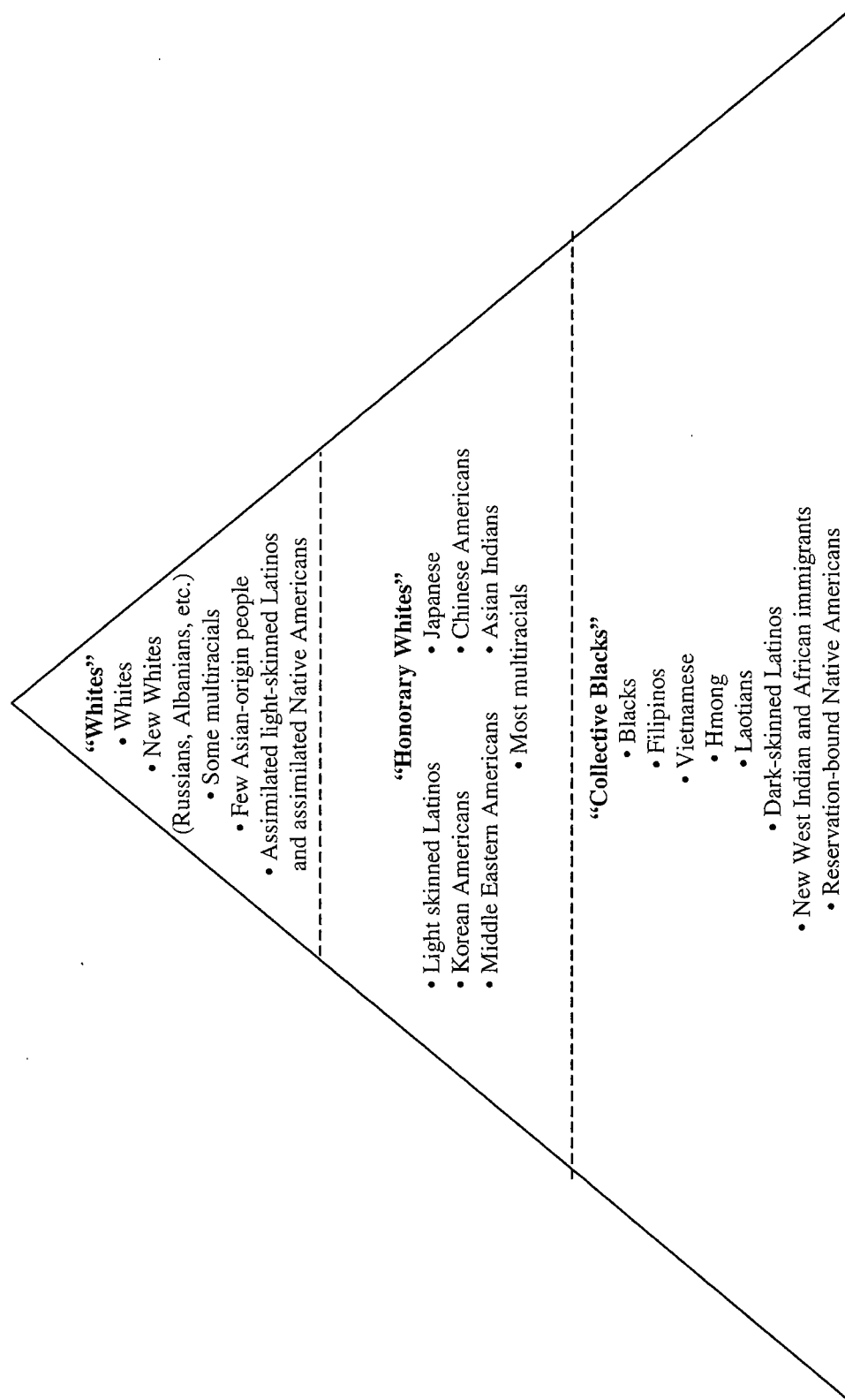


Fig. 1. Preliminary Map of Tri-Racial System in the USA.

immigrants and, in the near future, assimilated light-skinned Latinos. We predict the intermediate racial group or “honorary whites” will include groups such as most light-skinned Latinos (e.g. most Cubans and segments of the Mexican and Puerto Rican communities),¹³ Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, Asian Indians, Chinese Americans, and maybe Middle Eastern Americans. Finally, the “collective black” will include groups such as blacks, dark-skinned Latinos, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, and possibly Filipinos.

Why Latin Americanization Now?

Why do we contend race relations in the United States will become Latin America-like? The reasons are multiple. First, the demography of the nation is changing. Racial minorities are approximately 30% of the population today and, as population projections suggest, may become a numeric majority in the year 2050. These projections may even underestimate the proportion of minorities in the future, as early releases from the 2000 Census suggest that the Latino population was almost one percentage point higher than the highest prior projection (see Grieco & Cassidy, 2001). Thus, the racial demography of the United States may approximate that of many Latin American countries in the future.

Although whitening the population through immigration or by classifying many newcomers as white (Gans, 1999; Warren & Twine, 1997) are possible solutions to the new American demography, for reasons we discuss below, we do not think this is likely. Hence, a more plausible accommodation to the new racial reality is to: (1) create an intermediate racial group to buffer racial conflict; (2) allow some newcomers into the white racial strata; and (3) incorporate most immigrants of color into the collective black strata.

Second, the “new racism” and its accompanying ideology point in the direction of Latin Americanization. The mechanisms and practices to reproduce racial advantage in America have become as subtle and sophisticated as those typical of Latin America. For example, many whites and commentators explain the exclusion of blacks in certain neighborhoods as a matter of class¹⁴ rather than race in the United States as well as in Brazil (Nascimento & Nascimento, 2001; Twine, 1998). And, in both contexts, the specific mechanisms used to accomplish racial segregation are, for the most part, covert (Guimarães, 2001).

Third, the globalization of race relations will reinforce the transformations that are already taking place in the United States’ racial structure (Lusane, 1997). The once almost all-white Western nations have now “interiorized the other” (that is, included racial minorities in their midst) (Miles, 1993). The new world-systemic need for capital accumulation has led to the incorporation of “dark” foreigners

as “guest workers” and even as permanent workers (Schoenbaum & Pond, 1996). Thus, today, European nations have racial minorities in their midst who are progressively becoming an underclass (Castles & Miller, 1993; Cohen, 1997). European countries now have an internal “racial structure” (Bonilla-Silva, 1997) to maintain white power and have developed a curious racial ideology that combines ethnonationalism with a race-blind ideology similar to the American color blind racism (for more on this, see Bonilla-Silva, 2000). This new global racial reality, therefore, will reinforce the Latin Americanization trend in the United States.

Fourth, the convergence of the political and ideological actions of the Republican Party, conservative commentators and activists, and the so-called “multiracial” movement (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2001), has created the possibility for the radical transformation of the way we gather racial data in America. One possible outcome of the Census Bureau categorical back-and-forth is either the dilution of racial data or the elimination of race as an official category. At this very moment, Ward Connerly and his colleagues are gathering signatures to place the California Racial Privacy Initiative on the ballot in November 2002 to forbid California from classifying individuals by race.

Connerly himself, and the politics he represents, are emblematic of color blind racism and the Latin Americanization of race relations thesis we are advancing. Connerly is an anti-black black who, through marriage and claims of a racial mix background, has elevated his status to that of almost non-black. He led the political initiative that eliminated affirmative action in college admissions in California and now is involved in this campaign to stop gathering racial data altogether – the data needed to make the case about the significance of race.

Latin Americanization Trends

Although we do not expect Latin Americanization to fully materialize until the middle of the century at the earliest, there are many trends that indicate we are headed in that direction. Here we consider just a few objective and subjective indicators that point in the direction of our thesis.

Objective Indicators

If Latin Americanization is happening, the standing of the various racial strata should match their predicted position in the stratification order. Thus, one would expect whites to have a better social and economic standing than “honorary whites” who in turn should have a better social and economic standing than the “collective black.” This ought to be true regarding a range of social indicators. In terms of income, as Table 1 shows, light-skinned Latinos (Argentines, Chileans,

Table 1. Mean Income (\$) of Different Ethnic Groups, 1990.

Latino	Mean Income	Asian Americans	Mean Income
Mexican Americans	6,470.05	Chinese	12,695.05
Puerto Ricans	7,250.20	Japanese	15,801.93
Cubans	11,727.21	Koreans	10,177.38
Guatemalans	7,103.94	Asian Indians	15,857.61
Salvadorans	6,745.21	Filipinos	12,313.99
Costa Ricans	10,615.79	Taiwanese	13,310.58
Panamanians	10,701.25	Hmong	1,191.89
Argentines	15,506.40	Vietnamese	7,930.65
Chileans	12,727.60	Cambodians	3,759.82
Bolivians	10,661.95	Laotians	4,520.04
Whites	12,159.18	Whites	12,159.18
Blacks	7,210.56	Blacks	7,210.56

Costa Ricans, and Cubans) are doing much better than dark-skinned Latinos (Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, etc.). The exceptions in Table 1 (Bolivians and Panamanians) are examples of self-selected immigrants. For example, four of the largest ten concentrations of Bolivians in the U.S. are in the state of Virginia, a state with just 7.2% Latinos (Census Bureau, 2000). Table 1 also shows that Asians have a pattern similar to the Latinos. Hence, a severe income gap is emerging among honorary white Asians (Japanese, Asian Indians, Koreans, Filipinos, and Chinese) and those who we posit belong to the collective black (Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotians) (see also Murguia & Telles, 1996).

Poverty, educational, and occupational data also reveal that a more complex racial configuration is solidifying in the United States and falls within our expectation (data not shown in paper).

Subjective Indicators

As in the case of objective indicators, if Latin Americanization is becoming a reality, one would expect the various racial strata to exhibit a consciousness that reflects their position in the racial stratification order. Thus, "honorary whites" should be developing the idea that they are different (white-like and, thus, "better") than poor Asians, dark-skinned Latinos, and blacks. Conversely, whites must be beginning to make distinctions among the various strata (e.g. accepting honorary whites more than poor Asians and dark-skinned Latinos). Data on racial self-classification shows this pattern clearly. Light-skinned Latinos (e.g. Cubans, Argentineans, etc.) are anywhere between 25 to 100% more likely than

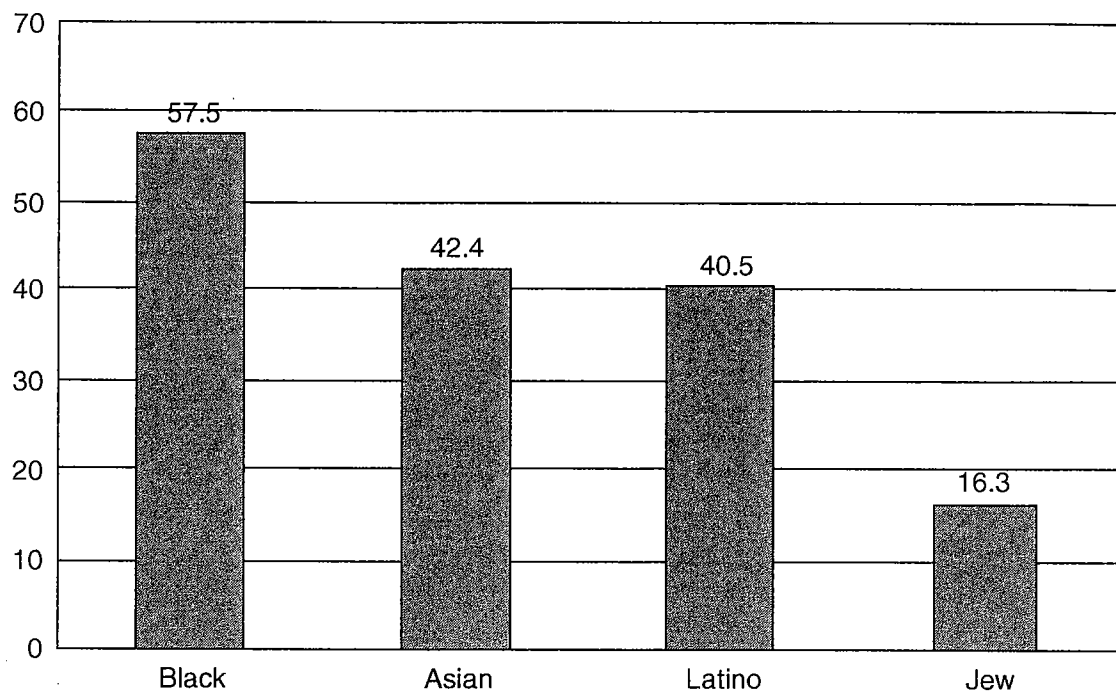


Fig. 2. Whites' Opposition to Intermarriage by Race of Prospective Mate. *Source:* 1990 General Social Survey.

dark-skinned Latinos (e.g. most Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, etc.) to self-classify as white. Thus, whereas 80% or more of Cubans and Argentineans claim to be white, fewer than 40% of Central Americans and Dominicans make such a claim (see Bonilla-Silva & Glover, forthcoming).

In terms of whites' racial attitudes, the available data also seems to support our argument. Figure 2 shows that whites possess a clear rank order preference for a close relative marrying a Black, Asian, or Latino. For instance, approximately six in ten whites object to a close relative marrying a Black compared to only four in ten objecting to a close relative marrying an Asian or Latino or a little more than one in ten objecting to a close relative marrying a Jew.

Although it would be ideal to have more recent data on whites' objection to intermarriage with the various racial and ethnic groups, unfortunately such data does not exist. The 1990 General Social Survey was the last time that white respondents were asked this question for each of the four groups. The questions on intermarriage that have been asked more recently, however, are mostly about whether or not whites support laws against black-white marriages. Given the core arguments of this paper, these items have limited analytical use for us. However, data on attitudes is ultimately less important than behavioral data. If racial actors are developing attitudes toward other groups based on their location in the racial structure, their attitudes should correlate to their behavior. That is, the racial

ranking of the groups and concerns over color should correlate with the way the groups make choices about neighborhoods, friends, and significant others. In terms of marital choices, the findings of a recent study on interracial marriage seem to fit this expectation (Quian & Lichter, 2001). These researchers found that although less than 5% of all marriages in this country are interracial, those who choose to marry outside their race, tend to marry people of lighter color. Thus, Asians are more likely to marry whites, followed by Latinos, and lastly blacks. Latinos are more likely to marry whites, followed by Asians, and lastly blacks. Blacks are more likely to marry Latinos than whites or Asians. Furthermore, in a press release about his findings, Quian commented that, "Skin color is still very important. African-Americans are the least likely to be interracially married; light-skinned Latinos are more likely to be interracially married than dark-skinned ones" (Phipps, 2001. See also Moran, 2001).

A similar pattern of preference for light skin also emerged in interviews with white parents in Northern California (Lewis, forthcoming). For instance, Mrs. Karpinsky, a mother of two, when asked whether she thought it would be a problem for her or her husband if one of their children married someone from a different race stated the following:

Mrs. Karpinsky: It depends what race "I do, to me, Asians aren't – to me it is, I hate to say this, it sounds so prejudiced, but to me it's more like Blacks are, African Americans would be the only . . . to me Asians are just like – white. And I guess I just am realizing I am saying that (laughs), but I wouldn't feel um, uncomfortable at all if my daughter, you know, married a, an Asian person or I wouldn't have felt strange dating an Asian person in college, but I would have felt a little bit – I would have felt uncomfortable dating a Black man.

Another way to assess if Latin Americanization is affecting the racial consciousness of various actors is examining their degree of affect toward other groups. According to Fig. 3, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans have more positive feelings toward Blacks than Asians, whereas Cubans have more positive feelings toward Asians than blacks (see also Murguía & Forman, forthcoming).

In another study, based on the 1990 Latino National Political Survey (de la Garza et al., 1992), the researchers found that this trend was even stronger when "Latinos" were disaggregated by racial self-classification (Forman, Martínez & Bonilla-Silva, 2000). That is, Latinos who self-identified as "black" or as "Latino" expressed warmer feelings toward blacks than those who self-identified as "white." These researchers also reported that 92% of Cubans compared with 58% of Puerto Ricans and 51% of Mexicans self-identified as "white." In all, these results help clarify why Cubans have less positive feelings toward Blacks than Puerto Ricans or Mexicans have toward Blacks.

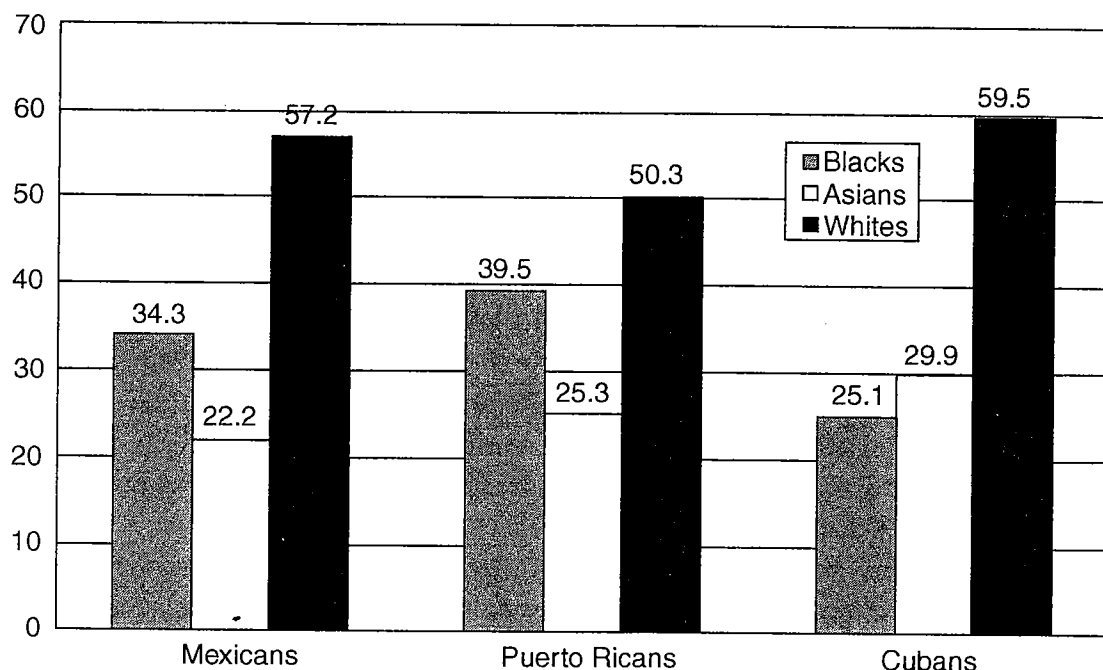


Fig. 3. Latino's Attitudes Toward Blacks, Asians, and Whites. *Source:* 1990 National Social Survey.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have argued two fundamental points about the nature of race relations in the post-civil rights era. First, we suggested that a new racial ideology has emerged to justify the racial status quo fitting of the practices typical of the "new racism" (Bonilla-Silva & Lewis, 1999). This ideology, which we label color-blind racism, includes a series of frames that allow whites to support the mythology of non-racism. Secondly, we argued that because of national and international changes in race relations, the racial stratification order of the United States will become Latin America-like. Specifically, we suggested – and provided preliminary data to support our claim – that a tri-racial stratification order is developing that will make race relations in the United States as complex as they are all over Latin America.

The consequences of our findings for racial politics in the 21st century are enormous. First, racial politics will change dramatically. We predict that the "us" versus "them" racial dynamic will lessen as "honorary whites" grow in size and social importance. This variegated "group" is likely to buffer racial conflict – or derail it – as intermediate groups do in many Latin American countries (Degler, 1986) as well as provide a path for upward, albeit limited, racial mobility (Nobles, 2000).

Second, the ideology of color blind racism will become even more salient among whites and honorary whites and will also influence members of the collective black.

Color blind racism, which is an ideology similar to that prevalent in Latin American societies, will help glue the new social system and further buffer racial conflict. As we all become more color blind, racial matters will be seen out of (racial) focus and explanations based on class may become more prominent (Harris, 1999; Wilson, 1978).

Third, if the Census Bureau decides to stop gathering racial statistics, documenting the impact of race in a variety of social venues will become extremely hard if not next to impossible. More significantly, because state actions always impact civil society, if the state decides to erase race from above, the *social* recognition of “races” in the polity may become harder. We may develop a Latin American-like “disgust” for even mentioning anything that is race-related.

Fourth, the deep history of black-white divisions in the United States has been such that the centrality of the black identity will not dissipate. For instance, research on even the “black elite” indicates that they exhibit racial attitudes that are similar to lower class blacks (Dawson, 1994). However, even among blacks, we predict some important shifts. Their racial consciousness will become more diffused (see Chap. 6 in Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Furthermore, the external pressure of “multiracials” in predominantly white contexts (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2001) and the internal pressure of “ethnic” blacks¹⁵ (Vickerman, 1999; Waters, 1999) may change the notion of “blackness” and even the position of some “blacks” in the racial stratification system. Pigmentocracy may become an even more important factor as a way of making social distinctions among “blacks” (Allen, Telles & Hunter, 2000).

Fifth, the new racial stratification system will be more effective in maintaining “white supremacy” (Mills, 1997). Whites will still be at the top of the social structure, but will face fewer race-based challenges. The expanded “collective black” will remain firmly at the bottom with a reduced space for racial contestation and honorary whites will remain *honorary*, that is, they will still face discrimination and will not receive equal treatment in society (for example, although based on their overall status we classify Middle-Eastern Americans as “honorary whites,” their treatment in the post-September 11 era indicates their status as “white” and “American” is very tenuous indeed).

We realize that many analysts and commentators regard the disappearance of Jim Crow racism as a sign of tremendous progress (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1997). We believe, however, that those at the bottom of the racial hierarchy will soon discover that behind the statement “We are all Americans” and whites’ protestation that “It wasn’t me” about contemporary racial inequality hides a deeper, hegemonic way of maintaining white supremacy. As a color blind Latin America-like society, racial inequality will be part of our landscape but with a much reduced political space for racial contestation.

If color blindness is the new dominant racial ideology in America and racial stratification is becoming tri-racial, what are the best strategies to fight this

new, two-headed monster? Unlike researchers in the prejudice paradigm, who advocate education or the internalization of new norms as the cure for "racism," those of us in the racial ideology paradigm focus on the struggle for resource redistribution and the elimination (or mitigation) of racial caste. Therefore, given the well-documented racial inequalities between blacks and whites in terms of wealth, income, neighborhood quality, and education as well as the continuing significance of discrimination, we believe that a Marshall-type race-targeted program and intensive policing against old and new-fashion discrimination will be necessary to eliminate racial inequality and guarantee that blacks and other racial minorities become full citizens of the United States.

But we are not naïve. Given the racial demography of the country and the fact that most whites believe the "it wasn't me" mythology, this kind of political program is unlikely unless a significant segment of the white community joins in the struggle for racial justice. But from where will these white racial progressives come from? Elsewhere one of the authors investigated the identity of "racial progressives" and found they are more likely to be young, white women from a working class background (Bonilla-Silva, forthcoming. See also Feagin & Vera, 1995). In fact, women and racial minorities have already become the *majority* in the working class as well as among those belonging in unions (Kelley, 1997; Roediger, 2002). This is the crack in the system: the possibility that the "(new) workers of the world (*might*) unite."

However, if our Latin Americanization prediction is right, the political issue of the future will no longer be restricted to convincing progressive whites to join in the struggle for racial justice. Instead, members of the "collective black" and their allies will have to devise strategies and practices to convince "honorary whites" that their interests are closer to the "collective black" than to whites. The political objective is to show them that their status is *honorary* (awarded by the dominant race) and that, therefore, they always face the possibility of discrimination and debasement (e.g. Middle Eastern Americans in the post-September 11 era). Otherwise "honorary whites" will ally with "whites" and proclaim like them that "It wasn't me" and that "We are all Americans."

NOTES

1. Shaggy (2000). It wasn't me. *Hotshot*. MCA Records.
2. The mainstream view on racism assumes the phenomenon is a matter of prejudiced individuals. For a critique and an alternative interpretation, see Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation," *American Sociological Review*, 62, 465–480.

3. By racial ideology we mean the racially-based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant racial ideology) or challenge (oppositional ideology) the racial status quo. Although all the races in a racialized social system have the *capacity* of developing these frameworks, the frameworks of the dominant race tend to become the master frameworks upon which all racial actors ground (for or against) their ideological positions.

4. A society's *racial structure* includes the totality of social relations and practices that reinforce systemic white privilege. For more on this, see Bonilla-Silva (2001).

5. For a thorough examination of this ideology, see Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (forthcoming). *Color Blind Racism or How Whites Justify Contemporary Racial Inequality*. Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield.

6. "Braceros" refers to Mexican workers brought to the country through the Bracero Program in the post-World War II era.

7. Although West (1993) and Wilson (1987) address the structural factors shaping black life chances, they also insist on the centrality of cultural factors seen as independent from the structural conditions faced by blacks. For a more elaborate analysis of this matter, see Chap. 1 in Bonilla-Silva (2001).

8. Elsewhere Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) have argued that there is a segment of the white community that does not subscribe to the new dominant racial ideology. This group, which they label as "white progressives" is mostly comprised of women from working class backgrounds with some college level education.

9. For discussions on the racialization of the word-system, see Balibar and Wallerstein (1991), Goldberg (1993) and Mills (1997).

10. Two central components of Latin American racial stratification are a tri-racial order and "shade discrimination" (Kinsbrunner, 1996) or "colorism" (ranking people according to skin tone). For an excellent review on racial matters in Latin America, see Peter Wade (1997). *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*. Chicago: Pluto Press.

11. Here we are adapting Tony Negri's idea of the "collective worker" to the situation of all those at the bottom of the racial stratification system (see Negri, 1984).

12. This map is a tentative rather than definitive placement of groups. Hence, the position of some groups may change (e.g. Chinese Americans, Asian Indians, and Arab Americans) and, at this early stage in our analysis, the map is not inclusive of all the groups in the United States (for instance, Samoans, Micronesians, etc., are not in the map). More significantly, if our Latin Americanization thesis is accurate, there will be categorical porosity as well as "pigmentocracy." The former refers to individual members of a racial strata moving up (or down) the stratification system (e.g. a light-skin middle class black person marrying a white woman and moving to the "honorary white" strata) and the latter refers to the rank ordering of groups and members of groups based on the way they look (the more "white" one looks, the higher esteem one receives).

13. For an example of Puerto Ricans becoming "white," see the case of middle class Puerto Ricans in California in Rodriguez (1999).

14. For a recent article claiming that residential segregation is mostly the product of class, see David R. Harris, "'Property Values Drop When Blacks Move in, Because . . .': Racism and SESE Determinants of Neighborhood Desirability." *American Sociological Review*, 64(3), 461–479. For an excellent critique of the class-based explanation of residential segregation, see Camille Charles Zubrinsky and Lawrence Bobo (1996). "Prismatic Metropolis: Race and Residential Segregation in the City of the Angels." *Social Science Research*, 25, 335–375.

15. By ethnic blacks we refer to first-generation West Indians, Haitians, and most Africans who struggle to distance themselves from African Americans. For more discussion on this matter, see Chapters 1 and 4 in Alex-Assensoh and Hanks (2000).

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